

Suspense

MYSTERY ADVENTURE CRIME



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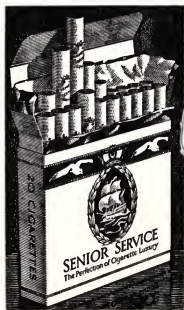
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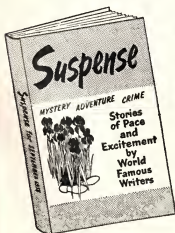
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AUGUST
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Suspense

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Gerald Kersh has an impressive beard and a tough constitution: he's been bombed, buried alive three times as a war correspondent, and sat up in his coffin demanding another lease of life when declared dead of pneumonia at the age of four! He has written twenty-three books. The latest, Fowlers End, is superbly riproaring and makes The Rake's Progress read like a Sunday School treat.

MURDERER'S EYE

By GERALD KERSH

THE generosity of the criminal generally consists in the giving away of something that never was, or no longer is, his own property.

A case in point is that of the robber and murderer Rurik Duncan, whose last empty gesture was thick and sticky with sentiment. Duncan gave away his eyes to be delivered after his death. It was regarded as a vital act of charity—in effect, a ticket to salvation—that this singularly heartless fellow gave permission for his eyes to be grafted on to some person or persons unknown. Having no further need for what he donated, he made a virtue of relinquishing it—stealing from his own grave; conning to the bitter end.

I knew a billionaire whose ears were stopped during his lifetime against any plea for charity, but who, when his claws relaxed in death, gave what he had to orphans. I knew a Snow Maiden of an actress whose body was bequeathed to science. All that they were proud of, the billionaire and the beauty, they let go because they had to. Rurik will rank with them, no doubt, on the everlasting plane. And why not? Rurik prized his eyes, of a strange, flecked, yellowish colour. He could expand or contract the irises at will, and seemed to look in a different direction while he watched your every movement.



Born on an eroded farm between the rocks and the desert, Rurik was what in my day was called a "nuisance," but is now termed a "juvenile delinquent." He killed chickens, maimed sheep, corrupted and led a mob of fourteen-year-old muggers; graduated to the rackets, in which he was employed to his pleasure and profit in nineteen states of the Union; gathered about him two coadjutors and went plundering from bank to bank, one of the most formidable operators since Dillinger. Something was missing from him that makes society possible—call it a heart, call it a soul, call it what you like, but say that he wanted to be alone. And so he was, right to his convulsive end, with a high-backed chair all to himself, and a secret which he thought he would carry on his own, locked within himself, to a narrow place where nobody could touch him.

This secret was the whereabouts of certain buried treasure. I mean the location of two million six hundred thousand dollars, which he had stolen and hidden nobody knew where.

It was Rurik and his two companions who stole the armoured truck in Butte, Montana, and the details were available in all the newspaper files in the world. Here it is sufficient to say simply that one second there was an armoured truck loaded with an immense payroll together with nearly all the money that had

been in the vault of a great bank. Next second there were three or four bewildered guards, loosely holding pistols they did not know what to point at; three streets full of traffic had stopped for the lights, and a great fortune was on its way to nowhere.

Only one shot was fired, and that by a bank guard named Larkin, who, when the three bandits appeared, let fly with a short-barrelled .38. As it later transpired, the robbers carried unloaded automatics—it seems that Rurik was very particular about this. So, in about as long as it takes a man to say, "Was that a backfire?" one of the greatest robberies of our time was perpetrated.

Reconstructing the affair, the Federal authorities arrived at the conclusion that Rurik and his men, halting somewhere on the outskirts of Butte, hid the money in some place tantalizingly close to town, known only to themselves. Each took eight thousand dollars for current expenses. About fifteen miles farther, the truck was abandoned at a point near where they had secreted a getaway car. Rurik drove them away; then they separated, arranging to meet when it was expedient to do so. But Little Dominic, trying to buy a used car in Helena, was recognized and died fighting it out with state troopers, and MacGinnis lost his way northwards among the rocks and died there, in his pigheaded way, rather than give himself up.

Only Rurik was taken alive, having fainted through loss of blood in a filling station; Larkin, the bank guard, had hit him in the hip.

When he was convicted of bank robbery, the FBI furnished the additional information that, under another name, Rurik was wanted in the state of New York for murder. So he was shipped east and there, after fair trial, sentenced to death by electrocution. And while Rurik was playing pinochle in the death house, there came to him a certain Father Jellusik, who said that Doctor S. Holliday, the eye surgeon, wanted Rurik's eyes.

The condemned man, laughing heartily, said, "Listen, the D.A. offers me my life if I sing where the dough is stashed! No disrespect, Father, but d'you think I never heard how you can see things in a dead man's eye?"

Father Jellusik said, "My son, that's an old wives' tale. A dead man's eye is no more revealing than an unloaded camera."

Rurik began, "Once, I looked into—Well, anyway, I never saw nothing. What do they want my eyes for?"

"An eye," said Father Jellusik, "is nothing but a certain arrangement of body tissues. Put it like this: you are you, Rurik. If one of your fingers were chopped off, would you still be Rurik?"

"Who else?"

"Without your arms and legs, who would you be?"

"Rurik."

"Now say you had an expensive miniature camera and were making your will, wouldn't you give it away?"

"To the cops, no."

"But to an innocent child?"

"I guess I might."

"And the eye, you know, is nothing but a camera."

In the end, Rurik signed a document bequeathing his eyes to Doctor Holliday for the benefit of this remarkable surgeon's child patients.

"You can't take 'em with you," Rurik is alleged to have said, thereby letting loose a tidal wave of emotion. The sob sisters took him to their bosoms and put into his mouth all kinds of scrap-book philosophy, such as: "If more folks thought more about more folks, the world—" His last words, which were: "Hold it, I changed my mind," were reported as: "I feel kind of at peace now."

The general public completely ignored the little matter of two and a half million dollars which Rurik had, to all practical intents and purposes, taken with him.

To Doctor Holliday, the grafting of corneal tissue from the eye of a man recently dead to the eye of a living child was a routine affair which he regarded much as a tailor regards the stitching of a collar. He was at once savagely possessive, devilishly proud, and bitterly contemptuous of the craft to which he was married. Years before, when he first became famous and the reporters came to interview him, his face set in a look of intense distaste, and talking in an over-emphasized reedy voice, Doctor Holliday said, "Human eyes? A fly's are far more remarkable. Your eye is nothing but a makeshift arrangement for receiving light rays upon a sensitive surface—a camera, and damned inefficient at that. Well?"

A reporter said, "But you've restored sight, Doctor Holliday. A camera can't see without an eye behind it."

Doctor Holliday snapped, "Neither can an eye see, as anybody but an absolute fool must know. Even if I had the time to explain the difference between looking and seeing, you have not the power to understand me; and even if you had, how would you convey what you understood to the louts who buy your paper? Let it be sufficient for me to say, therefore, that vision comes from behind the eye."

One of the reporters who wrote up things like viruses and

astronomy for the popular press said, "Optic nerve—" at which Doctor Holliday swooped at him like a sparrow hawk.

"Optic nerve! A wiring job, so to speak, eh? Splice it, like a rope, eh? Oh, I love these popular scientists, I love them! Can you name me thirty parts, say, of the mere eye—just name them—that you talk with such facility of optic nerves?"

The reporter, abashed, said, "I'm sorry, Doctor Holliday. I was only going to ask if it might be possible—I don't mean in our time, but sometime—really to graft a whole eye and, as you put it, splice an optic nerve?"

In his disagreeable way, mocking the hesitancy of the reporter's voice, Doctor Holliday said, "One thing is impossible, and that is to predict what may or may not be surgically possible or impossible in our time. But I can tell you this, sir: it is about as possible to graft a whole eye as it might be to graft a whole head. As every schoolboy must know, nervous tissue does not regenerate itself in the vertebrae—except in the case of the salamander, in which the regenerative process remains a mystery."

A lady reporter asked, "Aren't salamanders those lizards that are supposed to live in fire, or something?"

Doctor Holliday started to snap, but, meeting the wide gaze of this young woman, liked her irises and, gently for him, explained, "The salamander resembles a lizard, but it is an amphibian with a long tail. An amphibian lives both in and out of water. Have you never seen a salamander? I'll show you one"—and he led the way to an air-conditioned room that smelled somewhat of dead vegetation, through which ran a miniature river bordered with mud. In this mud languid little animals stirred.

The virus and astronomy man said, "Doctor Holliday, may I ask whether you are studying the metabolic processes of the salamander with a view to their application—"

"No, you may not!"

Next day there were photographs of a salamander in the papers, and headlines like this:

HEAD GRAFT NEXT?

Mystery of Salamander

After that, Doctor Holliday would not speak to anybody connected with the press, and was dragged into the limelight again only when he grafted the right eye of Rurik into the head of a four-year-old boy named Dicky Aldous.

It was not one operation, but eight, over a period of about six weeks, during which time the child's eye was kept half in and half

out of a certain fluid which Doctor Holliday has refused to discuss. The sensational press has hinted that this stuff is derived from the salamander. It is not for me to express an opinion. But why not? Alexander Fleming found penicillin in a bit of mould. Believe me, if it were not for such cranks, medicine would still be witch-doctoring, and brain surgery a hole in the head to let the devils out.

Anyway, when the bandages were lifted, Dicky Aldous, born blind, could see out of his new right eye. The lady reporter made quite a piece out of his first recognition of the colour blue. Another article suggested that the delicate tissues of the human eye, especially of the optic nerve, might be seriously altered by the tremendous shock of electrocution; it noted that Doctor Holliday was frequently found in consultation with the English brain specialist, Mr. Donne, and Doctor P. Felsen, the neurologist. Doctor Holliday himself, after a few outbursts against the press, became silent.

Paragraph by paragraph, the case of Dicky Aldous dropped out of the papers. Other matters came up to occupy our attention, and the fly trap of the public mind closed upon and digested what once it had gapingly received as The Dicky Aldous Miracle. But this is far from being the whole of the story.

Richard Aldous was a third-generation millionaire; genteel, sensitive, a collector of engravings. His wife, whom he had met in Lucca, was an Italian princess—finely engraved herself, and almost fanatically fastidious. As you can imagine, little Dicky Aldous in his fifth year was in complete ignorance of the ugliness that exists in the world.

The servants in the Aldous household had been examined, as it were, through a magnifying glass—generally imported from Europe, expense being no object. Dicky's nurse was a sweet-natured English gentlewoman. From her he could have heard nothing but old-fashioned nursery songs—sung off-key, perhaps, but kindly and innocuous—and no story more dangerous than the one about the pig that wouldn't jump over the stile. The housekeeper was from Lucca; she had followed her mistress six years previously, with her husband, the butler. Neither of them could speak more than two or three phrases in English. Here were no evil communications to corrupt the good manners of poor Dicky Aldous.

Yet one day, about a month after the sensational success of Doctor Holliday's operation had been fully established, the English nurse came down from the nursery to make the required announcement that Master Dicky was asleep, and there was

something in her manner which made the father ask, "Anything wrong, Miss Williams?"

Miss Williams didn't like to say, but at last she burst out—that somebody must have been teaching little Dicky to use bad language. She could not imagine who might be responsible. Closely pressed, she spelled out a word or two—she could not defile her tongue by uttering them whole—and Aldous began to laugh.

All the same, when the nurse was at supper, Mr. Aldous went to the nursery where his son lay sleeping. On the way into the room he met his wife hurrying out, evidently on the verge of tears.

She said, "Oh Richard, our boy is possessed by a devil! He just said in his sleep, 'For crying out loud, cease, you lousy sandwich!' Where did he ever hear a word like 'cease'?"

Her husband sent her to bed, saying, "Why, darling, little Dicky has had to suffer the impact of too many new sensations, too suddenly. The shock must be something like the shock of being born. Rest, sweetheart." Then he went into the nursery and sat by the child's bed.

After a little while, stirring uneasily in his sleep, speaking in the accents of the gutters of the West, Dicky Aldous said quite clearly, "Ah, shup! Aina kina guya rat!"—distinguishable to his father as: "Ah, shut up! I ain't the kind of guy to rat!" Then, tossing feverishly from side to side, his face curiously distorted so that he spoke almost without moving his lips, Dicky Aldous said, "Listen, and get it right this time, you son—" He added a string of expletives which, coming from him, were indescribably shocking. Perhaps "horrifying" is the better word, because you can understand shock, being aware of its cause, but horror makes no sense.

Presently, in a tense whisper, while the entire face of the child seemed to age and alter, Dicky said, "Dom, you take the big forty-five . . . Mac, take the cut-down, snub-nose blue-barrel thirty-eight . . . What for? Because I'm telling you. A big gun looks five times bigger on a runt like Little Dominic. Get me? And a blue belly-gun looks twice as dangerous in the mitt of a big lug like Mac. Me, I take the Luger, because one look at a Luger, you know it's made for business. But empty—I want 'em empty . . . You got an argument, Dom? O.K., so have I. In Montana, brother, they hang you up . . . My weapon is time. Cease, Dominic . . . Gimme a feel of that forty-five. Empty. Good, let it stay like that . . . O.K., we'll go over this again."

Then Dicky Aldous stopped talking. His face reassumed its proper contours, and he slept peacefully. Mr. Aldous met Miss Williams on the stairs.

"It's worrying me to death," she said. "I cannot for the life

of me imagine where Dicky darling picked up the word 'cease.' "

Mr. Aldous said, " I think, just for a few nights, Miss Williams, I'll sleep in his room." He lay down on the nurse's bed, and stayed awake, listening. He made careful notes of what poor Dicky said in his sleep—and many of the things the child said were concerned with visual memory, which the boy could not have had, since he was born blind.

" . . . They's a whole knot o' cottonmouths on the island past Miller's Bend. What'll you give me if I show you? What, you never seen a cottonmouth? It's a snake, see, a great big poison snake, and it's got a mouth like it's full of cotton, and poison teeth longer'n your finger. C'mon, give me what you got and I'll show you the cottonmouths," Dicky said, his voice growing uglier . . . " What d'you mean, you ain't got nothing? Ever learn the Indian twist, so you can break a growed man's elbow? All right, boy, I'll show you for free . . . Oh, that hurts, does it? Too bad. A bit more pressure and it'll hurt you for keeps—like that . . . You still ain't got nothing to see the cottonmouths all tangled in a knot . . . ? Oh, you'll get it, will you? You'd better. And you owe me an extra dime for learning you the Indian twist.

" No, sir, just for wasting my time I ain't going to show you them cottonmouths today—not till you bring me twenty cents, you punk, you. And then, maybe, I'll show you that nest o' diamondback rattlesnakes at Geranium Creek. But if you don't deliver, Malachi Westbrook—mind me, now—I'll show you the Seminole jaw grip. That takes a man's head clear off. And I'll show it to you good, Malachi. Mind me, now; meet me at the old Washington Boathouse tomorrow morning, and bring Charley Greengrass with you. He better have twenty cents with him, too, or else."

Mr. Aldous wrote all this down. At about three o'clock in the morning, Dicky said, " O.K., kids. You paid up. You're O.K. O.K., I'll just borrow Three-Finger Mike's little old boat, and Teddy Pinchbeck and me'll take you and Charley Greengrass to look at them cottonmouths. Only see here, you kids, me and Teddy Pinchbeck got to pole you way past Burnt Swamp and all the way to Miller's Bend . . . That'll cost 'em, won't it, Teddy? . . . You ain't got it? Get it. And stop crying. It makes me nervous, don't it, Teddy? And when I'm nervous I'm liable to show you the Indian hip grip, so you'll never walk again as long as you live."

At about nine o'clock in the morning, Mr. Aldous made an appointment with a psychologist, one Doctor C. A. Asher, who double-talked himself into one of those psychiatric serials that are longer than human patience. But what was Doctor Asher to say?

Little Dicky Aldous had no vision to remember with; there was nothing in his head upon which juvenile imagination might conceivably fall back.

It was by sheer accident that Mr. Aldous met a lieutenant of detectives named Neetsfoot, to whom he confided the matter simply because Neetsfoot had worked on the Rurik Duncan case.

The detective said, "That's very strange, Mr. Aldous. Let's have it all over again."

"I have it written down verbatim, lieutenant."

"I'd be grateful if you'd let me make a copy, Mr. Aldous. And look—I have children of my own. My boy has had polio, in fact, and I've kind of got the habit of talking to kids without upsetting them. Would you have any objection—this is unofficial—would you have any objection to my talking to your son a little bit?"

"What in the world for?" asked Mr. Aldous.

Lieutenant Neetsfoot said, "I'm not sure, Mr. Aldous, but I'll give you some leading points, if you like. First, I know all there is to know about Rurik Duncan. Secondly, I don't like to dig these matters up, but your son, four years old and born blind, had one of Rurik's eyes grafted into his head by Doctor Holliday. And now, thirdly, the child is going word for word into details of things that happened about sixteen years before he was born and two thousand miles away!"

"Oh, no, surely not!" cried Mr. Aldous.

"Oh, yes, surely so," said the lieutenant. "And geographically accurate, at that. What's more remarkable, your son has got the names right of people that he never heard of and who died before he was born. What d'you make of that? Teddy Pinchbeck was shot in a fight outside a church it must be ten, eleven years ago. A bad boy, that one. And where did I get my information? From Malachi Westbrook—he's a real-estate man now. There was an old Washington Boathouse, and Malachi Westbrook's the man that tore it down to make space for Westbrook Landing. Charley Greengrass runs his late father's store. There was a Three-Finger Mike, but he just disappeared. There really is a Cottonmouth Island just past a Miller's Bend, and in the mating season, it's one writhing mass. And Rurik Duncan did break Malachi Westbrook's arm before your son was born. Well?"

"This I do not understand," said Richard Aldous.

"Me neither. Mind if I sit with the boy a bit?"

"No, lieutenant, no . . . But how on earth could he know about cottonmouths? He never saw one. He never saw anything, poor child. To be frank with you, neither my wife nor I have ever seen a cottonmouth snake. I simply don't get it."

"Then you don't mind?"

"Go ahead by all means, lieutenant," said Mr. Aldous.

Neetsfoot went ahead—in other words he sacrificed two weeks of his vacation in a dead silence, listening by Dicky's bed while the child slept. Mrs. Aldous was in the grip of a nervous breakdown, so that her husband was present only half the time. But he bears witness—and so, at a later date, does an official stenographer—to what Dicky Aldous said, in what was eventually termed his "delirium."

First, the child struggled left and right. It appeared to the detective that he was somehow trying to writhe away from something; that he was in the clutch of a nightmare. His temperature went up to 103 degrees, and then he said, "Look. This is the setup, you kids. The Pan keeps the engine running . . . Get that right from the start, Pan . . . Little Joe sticks a toothpick under the bell push. I put the heat on. O.K.? O.K.!"

Lieutenant Neetsfoot knew what to make of this. The man who was called The Pan on account of his rigid face was driver for several gangsters; Little Joe Ricardo was a sort of assistant gunman who was trying to make the grade with the big mobs. The heat, as Neetsfoot construed it, was put on a union leader named M'Turk, for whose murder Rurik Duncan was tried, but acquitted for lack of evidence.

M'Turk was shot down in his own doorway; the street was aroused less by the shot than by the constant ringing of M'Turk's doorbell, under which somebody had stuck a toothpick.

But all this had happened at least eight years before Dicky Aldous was born.

"There is something distinctly peculiar here," Mr. Aldous said. "But I won't have the child bothered."

"I'm not bothering the child, Mr. Aldous; the child's bothering me. Heaven's my judge, I haven't opened my mouth. Not even to smoke! The kid does all the talking. Your little boy has gone into details about the M'Turk shooting, and this I can't understand. Tell me, Mr. Aldous, do you remember the details of M'Turk?"

"No, I can't say I do, lieutenant."

"Then how does the kid?"

"I must have told your people a thousand times: my son couldn't possibly have heard anything about the people or the events you keep harping on."

"I know he couldn't, Mr. Aldous. This is off the record and in my own time. That's understood, isn't it?"

"It is a most extraordinary situation, lieutenant. You know

what? The eye of this man Rurik Duncan having been grafted, complete with optic nerve, it's almost as if the child's actually seeing through Rurik Duncan's optic nerve!"

"Almost as if," said the lieutenant.

"But how?"

"Ask the doctor, don't ask me."

And Doctor Holliday was, indeed, the fourth witness to the last, and most important, utterances of the boy into whose orbit he had grafted the right eye of Rurik Duncan.

It happened, as previously, between two and three o'clock in the morning.

Dicky said, "Now listen. You, Dom, listen . . . And you listen, Mac . . . You heard it before? Then hear it again. This is the way I want it, and this is the way it's going to be . . . Dom, you always were trigger-happy. First, no loads in the rods. I want these guns ice-cold. One thing I won't do, and that's hang. And in Montana they hang you on a rope. Never forget that . . . Second, follow my timing and you can't go wrong. We beat the lights. Remember, it's two million and a half in small bills. Better men than you have died for less. Third, the short haul in the armoured truck and the swift stash in the rocks, you know where. Got it . . .? Fourth, the quick scatter. Now somebody could get hurt. So let's get this right. O.K.? I'll go over it again."

At this point Mr. Aldous, carried away by sheer excitement, cried, "Yes, but exactly where is the money? Where did we put it?"

Dicky sneered in his sleep, "And exactly where d'you get that 'did?' It ain't put there yet . . . And who's 'we?' Little Dom and Mac I told already. There ain't no more 'we.' Go burn me, mister, and sniff for it. 'We,' for cryin' out loud! Well, I guess you got to be dumb or you wouldn't be a cop. O.K. You want to know where the dough is? I'll tell you. It's in Montana. Got that wrote down? Montana. It's going to be loaded in a great big armoured truck in Butte. And taken where?" The child laughed in a singularly ugly way.

"It'll be my pleasure to tell you, mister: somewhere in Montana. All you got to do when I stash this dough is scratch. O.K., Mr. Dickins?"

"Wasn't Dickins the name of the district attorney who offered Rurik Duncan his life if he would divulge the whereabouts of the stolen money?" whispered Mr. Aldous.

Lieutenant Neetsfoot replied, not without bitterness, "Yes, it was. For Pete's sake, shut up! I think you've already talked us out of that two and a half million. And here I've sat like a

stone for fifteen days, and right at the end you must bust in and open your mouth."

Deeply hurt, Mr. Aldous said, "My son has always responded to my voice."

The lieutenant looked at him with disdain, and then said, in a carefully controlled voice, "Yes, Mr. Aldous. Your son has always responded to your voice, Mr. Aldous. But damn it, that wasn't your son who was talking—that was Rurik Duncan! That was Rurik Duncan running over orders with Little Dominic and MacGinnis before the truck was snatched and the money stashed away! I told you to keep quiet like me; I begged you to keep your mouth shut like I did. But no, your son has always responded to your voice. Congratulations, Mr. Aldous; you've got the costliest voice in the world. It's just talked us out of ten per cent of two million six hundred thousand dollars!"

They sat by the bed until dawn, but, his fever past, Dicky Aldous, perspiring freely, talked no more in his sleep.

When he awoke, his father, who had an unshakable faith in the power of his voice to arouse response in his hitherto blind son, said, "Now, Dicky darling, tell Daddy about Montana."

"Want to see blue," said Dicky; and became engrossed in the colour and the shape of a large red nonpoisonous nylon teddy bear of which he had previously known only the texture.

And from that day to this he has not talked of Montana. His memory of events preceding Doctor Holliday's operation is rapidly fading. Doctor Holliday, who visits the house from time to time, has put forward a half-hearted theory that, by some unexplained process, the regenerated nervous tissue, heavily charged with electricity, retained and conveyed the visual memory of Rurik Duncan only while this tissue was knitting. It may come back, he says, in adult life or, on the other hand, it may not.

Lieutenant Neetsfoot, whom Mr. Aldous regards as a "character," pays a visit every other Sunday. He likes to play with the little boy.

It was he who said to me, "This is unofficial, off the record; but I'm pretty observant. When I was a rookie I learnt to watch people without seeming to. And I can tell you there's something very, very funny about that kid's eye when he thinks he isn't being observed. He's seven now. I'm due to retire in nine years. Call me crazy but, believe me, when that kid is old enough to have a car of his own and take a holiday without anybody else along, wherever he goes I'll follow him."

Here, for the time being, the matter rests.

Round the world in a tramp steamer with a hundred pounds in his pocket when he was 21, then the Army, because he'd missed seeing India!—Berkely Mather—Colonel Davies in real life—has recently retired: is married, has two teenage sons, lives in Sussex. The James Sheldon stories are a new venture, and Suspense readers will be hearing more of this pilot adventurer and the so-beautiful, elusive Lin Nou-ell.

RED FOR DANGER

By BERKELY MATHER

THEY were brainwashing the fat Shanghai silk merchant that night. It was the third, and painful stage, when they pass from the academic to the actual. He had had his dialectic materialism. Next would come self-criticism. Then general confession. Then specific confession. Then he'd start signing anything they put in front of him.

He wasn't enjoying it.

Neither was I particularly, but at least his moaning, punctuated with sharp yells, was serving to keep me awake. I had to stay awake. Having gone through all this myself two months previously, I could have told him some things that might have helped, but we had never got beyond a few muttered words in pidgin English in the narrow passage between the cells, when they had taken us out for exercise every second morning.

Peng Fu, the big Manchurian guard, stopped by my grating.

"He will break, that one, just before midnight," he muttered with the certainty of long experience. "It would have been sooner but confession means telling where he has hidden his taels of silver. That gives a man strength. He has already betrayed his wife and eldest son." He cleared his throat and passed on. He hated speaking Cantonese, but that was the only language that we both understood.

I crouched in the darkness beside the grating and counted the twenty-four clacketty, wooden-soled paces that would take him up to the interrogation cell and back again. The prison noises were stilled now except for the whimpering of the silk merchant and a quavering, high-pitched song from the Non-political Block across the compound. Peng Fu halted on the return trip.

"Repeat it again, foreign devil," he said softly.

"When the interrogators have left and after you have been relieved," I whispered. "Out of this grating, which you will have left unbolted, down the passage and out through the door at the end. Turn left past the rice store and continue to the main wall. The ladder will be in the drain beside the bean garden. Over the wall and across the paddy on the other side. At the road, turn right. Skirt the village left-handed and wait in the shadow of the joss house, which stands on the rise behind the burial ground."

He grunted and started to move on. I shot my hand through the grating and grabbed his sleeve. He snarled and wrenched away.

"What if the guide is not there? What if——?" I began.

"That is your pigeon. My miserable reward goes only up to that point. If you are caught and brought back it has been arranged that your throat will be cut before you are interrogated



again. It took two months to break you last time, but now you would smash the rice bowl of your blind mother and spit on the tomb of your ancestors before they even started."

He was right and we both knew it.

I lay back in the darkness on my bamboo pallet and tried not to think. Usually that was easy. One just concentrated on the lice, or let one's mind go back over that last dinner in Hong Kong, two hours before take-off—although that was a form of mental masochism that always broke down before the *cog au vin*. But tonight nothing worked: I just thought, if one could call the alternating waves of almost hysterical hope and black doubting depression thinking.

I'd heard the prison whispers of this escape organization. "The Brotherhood of the Bounding Hare" was the nearest I could get to it in Cantonese. Some said they were all Chinese—other said they were White Russians and Chiang Kai-shek's men, financed by the Americans. It was just the sort of figment men without hope would conjure up. But was it a figment? Those three American airmen who got away from Swatow gaol must have been helped by somebody.

But why should anyone stick his neck out for me, a free-lance pilot too dim to keep out of trouble? How had they fixed Peng Fu? These prison guards were supposed to be picked men, so well indoctrinated that they were incorruptible. But could you count on anybody in this crazy set-up being above a price? Was this just another and more devilishly subtle part of the treatment? Would I get over that wall only to be met by a couple of waiting guards? But why should they go to all that trouble? What was to stop them rubbing me out in here if they wanted to?

I heard the cell door slam at the end of the passage, and the three interrogators ghosted past my grating on their felt-soled slippers. From the slithering pick-one-drop-one sound of the last one, I gathered that the lame North Korean professor had been in charge of tonight's session and I felt sorry for the silk merchant.

I started to count now—I don't know why. Perhaps it was a throw-back to a kid's game I used to play; if the teacher didn't look up and call me out before I got to two hundred she wouldn't ask for the homework I hadn't done, and I'd duck a lamming. If Peng Fu didn't return before—

He was back with his relief before I got to seventy, and I heard the gratings being shot back as they checked the occupants of the lower cells with an electric torch. You had to sit up when it shone on your face and say, "I greet you, Comrade Guard." If you didn't, you were either impolite or dead; and it was better



for your immediate comfort if you were the latter.

They reached my grating at last and I said my party piece, and then I sat listening tensely as they continued up the passage and into the block of the "Less Advanced in Correct Thinking"—the poor devils who still had it to come. I got up and tried the grating. It gave under my pull, and since I had been steeling myself for a disappointment, I was nearly sick with relief. I dragged off my straw sandals and stuffed them into the waistband of my tattered shorts, then slipped out into the passage.

There was a smoky naphtha lamp at the top end, but here it was as dark as it had been in the cell. I padded down to the bottom doorway, my bare feet making no noise on the hard earth floor. The door was of iron-studded teak, and it creaked like the very devil as I drew the bolts back and inched it open. I could see the guards' torch moving along the barred windows as they checked the upper tiers of the Less Advanced, and I knew that I had the better part of five minutes before they returned this way again, the relief back to the guardroom at the end of the block, and Peng Fu to the barrack hut at the main gate. That would be time enough, provided the ladder was where it should be.

I ran quickly along the passage between the rice store and the

block I had just left—that of the “Newly Enlightened and About to be Joyful”—and out into the yard. The bean patch, manured by the natural products of the prison, was unpleasant to cross in bare feet but I wasn’t worrying about that. The ladder was all that mattered now.

It was there, lying in the drainage ditch as Peng Fu had said—a rickety bamboo affair that was too short by five feet to reach the top of the wall; and it was only when I pulled myself up to the parapet that I realized fully what one small bowl of weevily rice and a square inch of dried fish a day can do to one’s condition.

I managed it at last and lay heaving and retching on the rough stone coping until I had recovered. It was only a fifteen-foot drop on the other side, but I did not know what lay in the darkness at the bottom. There was no time to ponder, however, so I lowered myself to the full extent of my arms and let go. It proved to be a sloping bund of hard-packed earth, and I rolled down it into the flooded paddy field with a splash like a herd of hippos taking to the river.

Peng Fu had told me that the overall journey to the joss house would “take an ox an hour,” which was the peasant’s way of saying two miles; but since the Chinese are like the Irish when they judge distance that might have meant anything from one mile to six. In actual fact it took me half an hour to the village, and a further ten minutes detouring round it in the dark until I recognized the curved roof of the little temple against the sky.

A dim figure emerged from the shadow of the wall as I approached, and I clutched the chunk of rock with which I had provided myself on the way up the slope. He came towards me in the faint light of the moon which was just rising, and I could see that he was just a kid in black peasant clothes, his face hidden beneath a straw coolie hat.

“Mist’ Sheldon?” he said. And before I could answer he went on in quite good pidgin, which was strange for these parts, where few Europeans ever came, “Makee fast more far along me.” He turned, and set off down the slope in the opposite direction from the village at a quick jog-trot.

I would have liked to ask him where we were going and what the set-up was, but I wasn’t feeling too bright by this time, and I needed what breath I had left to keep up with him. I realized from the position of the moon that we were going roughly south-east towards the coast, and that Amoy lay over to our right. The going was hellishly tough, waterlogged paddy intersected by drainage channels and high bunds, and we weren’t crow-flying because he detoured widely round the occasional farmhouses and the small walled villages. I did try to gasp out a question once or

twice in the early stages but he just grunted, "Makee fast more far," and kept going.

I don't remember much about the last bit of the journey. I wasn't conscious of anything except the agony in my tortured lungs and the dull numbness of my legs. I gave it up twice and sat down on a bund, babbling obscenities, but each time the boy just squatted patiently a few yards away and waited until the spasm had passed, and then set off again.

We came to the coast at last—a flat, sandy bit of it—and I made out the spars of a couple of fishing junks lying at anchor just off shore, and a sampan or two pulled up on to the beach. He left me then and I lay on my belly and spewed sour bile and wind into the sand and then sank into merciful blackness. After that I remember being helped into a sampan, then up the side of a junk, and finally lying under a heap of stinking fishing nets and listening dully to the coughing thump of a diesel engine before I passed out.

I came to in the dawn as I was being pulled up the side of yet another boat. This one was clean and grey and the people who were helping me were clean and white. One of them said, "Jeez, this guy sure has taken a beating." And somebody barked, "Put his head over the scuppers, bo'sun—he's going to be sick."

And I was.

The Straits of Formosa are only a hundred miles wide at that point, and the sub-chaser made it in something less than five hours. They were as kind to me as only sailors know how, but they wouldn't let me talk until they had got me into the American Naval Hospital in Taipeh, where their Intelligence people asked dozens of questions but refused to answer mine.

I did gather, however, that some sort of mistake had been made. They'd been trying to rescue one of their navy fliers, a man named Felton who had crashed inside the Chinese territorial limit some weeks before, and our names had somehow got confused. But if they were disappointed they hid it well, and they were still unbelievably kind. It was only on the third day that I noticed a slight cooling off in manner. That was the day they told me that they were flying me down to Hong Kong, as the British police wanted me for questioning.

Two Inspectors met me as I got off the plane. They were polite and very correct, but under their formality I could sense their hostility. I tried to make small talk on the short drive from Kai Tak airport to headquarters, but it got me nowhere.

It wasn't Third Degree because the Hong Kong police don't go in for that sort of thing. The Superintendent never dropped a single mister, and even put in an occasional sir. They gave me a

cup of tea every hour or so, and there was an open box of cigarettes on the table between us. My chair was quite comfortable, no strong lights shone in my eyes, and the only thing in the room that remotely resembled a rubber club was the ebony ruler that lay on the blotting pad. I'd got to the stage where I was almost wishing that he'd take a swing at me with it; at least that would show that his patience was wearing thin. As it was it looked as if he could keep it up for another eight hours.

He looked down at the thick wad of pencilled notes in front of him. "Shall we just run over it again, sir?" he suggested almost apologetically.

"Why not just stick to the bits you hope I'll slip up on?" I snapped. "You can check most of what you've got there."

"There may be some little point you've forgotten. Repetition often helps." He took up the pencil and waited.

I sat back and closed my eyes and just let it run. It was like putting the needle into the groove of a record. This part was easy. It was that innocent little question he would slip in from time to time that I had to watch, each time phrased differently, and always when I was least expecting it: How had I first met Boethelo. . . ?

"James Sheldon," I repeated. "Before the war I flew for Nationalist China against the Japs. *In* the war I flew freight from India into Chungking—over the Hump. *After* the war I flew for China again, until it fell to the Reds. Then I came here and bought a clapped-out Dakota and flew for anybody who'd charter me—"

"Including the Reds?"

"You know damn well I didn't. If I'd wanted to do that I could have stayed over the other side. They'd have paid me well—and I wouldn't have had the Hong Kong police pushing me around. I flew for the smaller mercantile houses, Chinese and Portuguese mostly—here to Macao, the Philippines, Singapore—"

"You had trouble with the police in Singapore?"

"Trouble?" I said bitterly. "I was pinched and fined four thousand Straits dollars for carrying opium, and the airport was barred to me. It wasn't my fault. It had been shoved inside some baled cotton that I was carrying. I'm not asking you to believe that, but it happens to be the truth."

"Please go on, Mr. Sheldon."

"That four thousand bucks cleaned my reserve out. I didn't get another charter. I got in the red here on account of fuel bills, and maintenance dues, and someone slammed a writ in on me."

"I wonder that you stayed on in Hong Kong."

"What the hell else could I do? I stayed on hoping that

someone would give me a charter—and an advance big enough to get the plane out of hock. But nobody ever did. Then, just when I was flat broke, I was offered this job—”

“By whom?”

“I told you. By Boethelo. He made me a proposition one night in the bar of the Peninsular. He’d bought a big freighter on behalf of the Chinese Nationalists in Formosa, and he wanted me to fly it there.”

“How did you first meet Boethelo?”

“Oh, for God’s sake—how many more times? I told you Over a drink in the bar.”

“You accepted the proposition?”

“I told you that too. Who wouldn’t have accepted in my position? The money was good—and he paid me half down, with a note for the balance on delivery.”

“But you never delivered it—at least not to Formosa.”

I reached for a cigarette. He held a light out for me, but there was no change in his mask of bland, polite incredulity. It was like fighting smoke.

“I never delivered it anywhere.” I drew hard on the cigarette. “Call me a bloody liar and have done with it. It’ll save time.”

“Go on please,” he said softly.

“An hour after we took off, the Chinese flight engineer told me to get out of the seat. I told him to go to hell. The Polish navigator slugged me over the head. When I came to we had landed at Amoy and the Red Security Police were all over us. I was carted off to the local gaol. I never saw the other two again.”

He looked down at his notes, checking with the point of his pencil. “The thing that puzzles me a little—” he began.

“I know,” I said. “If the others knew enough to navigate and land at Amoy, why have me along at all? I don’t know for certain, but my guess is that neither of them had a pilot’s ticket that would have born scrutiny in Hong Kong. Without that they couldn’t have got clearance at the airport.”

“So they took you on to Amoy and you landed in the town gaol. Go on, Mr. Sheldon.”

“They treated me quite decently at first. A doctor put a couple of stitches in my head, and I had a bath, and a meal. But after that I was visited by a young Chinese who gave me the same treatment as you’re giving me now. He made me go over and over my story in the hope that I’d slip up somewhere.”

“And did you?” He smiled.

“No—and for the same reason. I was telling them the truth. I had no motive for doing otherwise. He took it all down in

Chinese and asked me to sign it. I wouldn't, of course, so he had it translated into English. But I still refused. Then the holiday ended. They were angry—and when those boys get angry they get rough.”

“Why did you refuse to sign if you had told them the truth?”

“Because I'm not that dumb, Superintendent. I'd heard stories. They could have cooked my statement and copied the signature.”

“But you did sign something later.”

“Sure I did. As you say, later. I signed a confession that I was a capitalist spy. I signed another that I was in the pay of the British Government, and another that the Americans were paying me. And two admitting that I had engaged in germ warfare in Korea and that I had tortured Red Chinese prisoners of war. Two months or so strapped into a chair with a light shining in your eyes, with a loudspeaker going night and day, little or no food and finally the bamboo treatment, and you might have done the same. In any case I'd learnt a little sense by that time. Both Governments would know darned well that I wasn't on their payrolls—and anyhow, I've never been in Korea. Finally, I signed them 'James Roderick Sheldon.' My second name is 'Robert.' I knew that I'd be able to refute everything when I got back.”

He pounced on that one. “You were certain that you'd get back?”

“When you stop hoping in a place like that, Superintendent, you die.”

He sat looking at a spot on the wall over my head, tapping the pad in front of him with his pencil, and I had the feeling that he was now as tired as I. I was wrong though, because even as I relaxed and sat back wearily in my chair he fired his last shot.

“You say that you had never met this crew before—the navigator and engineer?” He looked at the notes. “Kowlalski and Lam Sing?”

“Never.”

“Then why did you insist on taking them along?”

I shot bolt upright. “I insisted? Goddamnit—I wanted to take my own crew. They needed the job as much as I did. But Boethelo made that one of the conditions. I argued for over an hour. He said the consignees had nominated them.”

“Was anybody there during this argument?”

“Sure. Mascarhenas, one of the purchasing agents.”

He leaned forward and fixed me with his eye. “Boethelo swears that *you* nominated Kowlalski and Lam Sing. He jibbed because he didn't know them, whereas he *did* know your crew

—and trusted them. He says he knew them better than he knew you and that they were the reason that he picked you. He says he never liked the idea of this last minute switch but he had no option but to accept—”

“The man’s a lousy liar—” I shouted.

“—and Mascarhenas supports him in this. They’ve both sworn an affidavit on it.”

“There’s your answer,” I said. “Obvious isn’t it? Boethelo has sold out to the Reds. He got a bigger offer from them for the plane, so he put his own men aboard to ensure delivery, and squared Mascarhenas as a crooked witness.”

He shrugged. “Feasible,” he said, “except for the well-known fact that Boethelo is one of the richest men in Hong Kong. His entire interests are here and in Formosa. If the Reds ever took over, his is one of the top four names on their list for liquidation. He’s a hundred per cent loyal, Mr. Sheldon. He’s got to be if he wants to stay wealthy—and alive.”

He rose and walked to the door and threw it open. “You can go now. But we’ll probably be wanting to see you again . . . And soon.”

I turned and faced him as I went out. “Answer me one thing.”

“If I can,” he answered non-committally.

“If, as you think, I sold out to the Reds and delivered that plane to them, why should they shove me in gaol and give me the works? Or do you think I’m lying about that too?”

“What I think doesn’t matter,” he said. “My job is to deal in facts. Purely as a matter of hypothesis of course, it *could* have been staged as a cover for your return here, couldn’t it? Particularly if you intended working for them again. Good evening, Mr. Sheldon.” And he closed the door.

An unobtrusive little Chinese in coolie clothes slipped quietly on to my tail as I left the building, and I knew that this was the shape of things to come. From now on the police would shadow me everywhere. I wished them the joy of it. I had nowhere to go except to the one room I rented over a Portuguese café on the Kowloon side. Fortunately I had paid a year’s rent on it some months before when things started to look grim, and I still had time to run.

What lay ahead of me now I hadn’t the heart to start figuring out. With this smear on me I had no chance of getting a job anywhere. They had let me ring my bank from headquarters, and I found out that my balance stood at a hundred and forty-five dollars. Boethelo had stopped his cheque as soon as I had been reported overdue at Formosa. A hundred and forty-five

Hong Kong dollars was eating money for barely a month—even eating modestly.

It started to rain as I left the ferry and walked across the square in front of the station, one of those quick soaking down-pours that come without warning in Hong Kong. I hesitated for a moment between getting a taxi or going into the bar of the Peninsular, and decided on grounds of economy against either. I turned up my collar and slogged on, reflecting bitterly that even the clothes I stood up in were a hand-out from the Americans.

I heard the Chinese plain-clothes man pattering after me as I turned down the lane that led to my lodgings, and I was in the act of wheeling and swearing at him in futile, childish rage when it happened. It was that turn which saved me.

I thought it was just a punch in the back in that first moment, even when it was followed by a cold sear of pain and a trickle of something warm running down under my shirt. I jumped sideways and the little Chinese, carried by the force of his thrust, shot past me. I tried to rabbit-punch him but he jinked like an eel and came in for a second jab, knife held low and professionally, point up. If you've been taught in the right schools you go back and down when that happens, and your belly, which is the target, travels in an opposite parallel to the sweeping upward thrust. My school had been the best—the waterfront of this very town.

My rump hit the pavement and my feet came up in one movement. He may have been small but he was tough and he knew his business. He turned sideways and missed the full force of the kick I aimed at his crutch. I lay on my back on the wet flagstones and waited for him to jump on me with both feet which is usually the next move in the gambit. The counter to this is to roll sideways in the last split second and to sweep your opponent's feet from under him, get to your own and kick for his belly and face in that order. It's quite effective but you've got to be quick, which I wasn't. I was in poor condition and I wasn't thinking fast enough. In fact, beyond a sort of dull anger and a bewildered wonder at what the police were coming to in trying to carve a citizen—even a citizen under a cloud—I wasn't thinking at all.

He didn't jump though. He was poised to do so when he gave a soft little squeak like a mouse when an owl gets it, and he landed on the pavement and stayed there. I felt myself being pulled to my feet and hustled along down the lane. I couldn't see who was doing the hustling because he had an armlock on me from behind like a bouncer giving a drunk the bum's rush, and I was concentrating on trying to stamp on his toes. I knew it was a Chinaman

and a big one, but that was all.

There was a car at the end of the lane and he shot me in through the door, slammed it after me and jumped into the driving seat. We jerked forward. A faint scent came to me through the darkness. I knew that scent. They used to make it in Peking before the Comrades took over. Not much of it because it cost a lot. They say that in the old days any woman using it, other than the Emperor's favourite concubine, lost her head—literally. But that was a long time ago. I only knew one woman who used it now, and it was I who lost my head—in one seething upsurge of rage.

"You bitch!" I swore. "I might have known that you were in it somewhere."

She laughed softly. "Poor Jim," she said in her perfect English. "I'm sorry. I did not know they would try so soon. We were waiting outside your lodgings."

"Why?"

"We have much to talk about, you and I."

"Not a damn thing, sister. Not till I've got my health and strength back, and then I'll be doing the talking." I made as if to open the door, but it was only a bluff because my legs wouldn't have carried me and we were travelling fast by this time. She laughed again and a lighter flared in the darkness as she lit a cigarette, so that I saw with the funny little clutch it always gave me round the heart the exquisite moulding of that perfect Mandarin face. She leaned over and put the cigarette between my lips, and I felt her fingers flutter for an instant on my cheek like a butterfly's wing.

"What goes on?" I asked, curiosity overcoming dignity.

"One of Boethelo's men," she answered. "Chang . . . dealt with him."

"I thought it was a cop," I said. "Why should Boethelo want me killed? He's doing all right without that."

"He was," she corrected. "But now it is essential to him that you and one Mascarhenas die."

"The rat that testified with Boethelo against me to the police? Why should Boethelo want *him* killed?"

"Because now he is ready to testify *for* you. But you must not talk any more." Her hand ran down over my shoulder. "You are losing blood badly."

She was right. I lay back against the upholstery which was leather and soft, and then I realized muzzily that it had changed to silk brocade and was softer—and that the scent was stronger, and that I was very tired indeed.

I woke as we turned into a courtyard and stopped. Chang

pulled me gently out of the car, and together they helped me up the steps into a house that was cool and dimly lit, and where a fountain splashed softly somewhere in the background. They lowered me on to a divan and an old woman came out and attended to the gash in my shoulder-blade. She muttered something as I struggled feebly, and Chang came over and held me down. Then I was conscious of the scent again and a voice from a long way off saying, "You must lie still. It is only a flesh wound, but you are very weak."

I said, "Your friends the other side saw to that."

"Why do you say *my* friends? You know which side I am on." She said it with mild surprise but without anger.

"Who the hell knows which side any of you are on? You've got to check on someone's cash-book to find that out." I had the satisfaction as I opened my eyes of seeing her wince slightly: get a well-bred Chinese to show that much emotion and you've hit a spot where it hurts. "I risked my own passport by smuggling you into Hong Kong. You told me you were an anti-Red agent, but then you introduced me to Boethelo. And this happened. You must have known he intended that plane to go to the other side—you double-crossing slant-eyed she-devil."

"I did know," she said simply. "He was a trusted agent of ours—and yet I knew he was dealing with the Reds. But I couldn't prove it. I had to prove it."

"So I get sold down the river to test a theory? All right, you've proved it now. And I've lost every damn thing I ever had . . . My God, I thought the Chinese were supposed to be strong on gratitude."

"Listen to me, Jim," she pleaded. "It was not intended that they should take over the plane and land you at Amoy. It would have been sufficient for our purpose if they had just made the attempt. We were to have had two of our own men hidden in the rear compartment. A truck broke down at the last moment and we were unable to get them into the airfield. I even tried to get in myself to stop your taking off—"

"Right off the cuff," I sneered.

"I am not lying," she flashed. "Why should I have risked getting you out of their gaol?"

"*You* risk it? The Americans got me out—and that was only by accident. They were after somebody else and got our names confused—"

"I know," she said. "Felton—Sheldon. Even that was arranged. By us. But it was you we were trying to help. We never stopped trying."

She rose from the divan and walked to the door. Then she

turned and looked at me, and when she spoke again it was not in her normal voice.

"Mist' Sheldon?" she said in high-pitched pidgin. "Makee fast more far along me."

I saw it all then and I tried to struggle to my feet, but Chang and the old woman held me down.

"Lin! Lin! Come back," I called desperately.

But she had gone.

The Superintendent said, "If you'd only told me that little levil Lin Nou-ell was in it we'd have saved a lot of time. Why didn't you?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. "I really don't know. I honestly thought she'd sold me out when she steered me into this Boethelo deal, and I was hating her guts. But somehow I couldn't squeal on her."

"When did you first meet her?" he asked curiously.

"Last year. I helped her in from over the border. She hadn't any papers and the Reds were close on her track."

"You know that's an indictable offence?"

"I do . . . But you told me this talk would be off the record."

"It is," he agreed. "But don't take too much for granted in future, Mr. Sheldon. Our sympathies may lie on her side, but we're supposed to be neutral. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm sticking around," I said. "Someone has paid the amount Boethelo owed me into my account. I've got my plane out of hock and I'm solvent again."

"It certainly wasn't Boethelo himself," the Superintendent said. "He's skipped over the Border."

"What made Mascarhenas come clean?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I could hazard a guess, of course. He was a very frightened man: he just walked in and told us the lot. Some little method of persuasion known only to Miss Lin Nou-ell and that big Hakka bodyguard of hers, no doubt."

"Where is she now?" I asked casually as I rose and shook hands. Too casually, perhaps.

"I don't know," he said. "If I did I'd have to arrest her for being here without proper papers and engaging in political activities. You might tell her that when you see her."

It might have been a wink that he gave me, or it might not.

But actually she was waiting for me in the car outside, and she was laughing as I crossed towards her. Lin laughs often and it sounds like the distant temple bells on top of Lan Tao. Very pleasant indeed.

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An amiable solicitor, six feet three high, Michael Gilbert is the father of five daughters and one son. He started his first novel as a means of raising cash, but left out of account the 'war, during which his regiment despatched him to North Africa and the Germans to a prison camp. From there he walked four hundred miles down the length of Italy in a waiter's ancient tail-coat ! Since then he has produced a first rate series of detective novels, writing them methodically at the rate of seven hundred and fifty words a day, in the train on the way to the office !

SAFE !

By MICHAEL GILBERT

MISS SENNETT ran in panic up the front path. She clattered up the outside steps. The front door was open. Pressing down the switch at the foot of the stairs was an unconscious gesture, but she must have done it, because the dim landing light came on.

The hall was full of the fog.

She ran up the stairs. Her breath was coming in little gasps now. As she reached her landing the light went out. The gasp became a stifled scream. It took a moment to remember that it was an automatic switch, the frugal sort, that always went out before you reached your own flat. She felt for her latch key, got it into the keyhole at the third attempt, opened the door and tumbled through it. It was only when she was standing inside the sitting-room, and had bullied her shaking hands into taking off her hat and coat that she began to recover some hold of herself.

"Don't be stupid," she said out loud. "You're not a child. You can't solve it by running away."

Like a full stop to this sentence the door bell buzzed.

Her first reaction was a return of panic. Her second was cold common sense.

"Use your brain," she said. "You've learnt to do that, if



you've learnt nothing else. Suppose it is him. It's no good just keeping the door shut. He knows where you are. He can make trouble."

The bell sounded again.

"And if it isn't him, if it's just a tough out for trouble, better take him on there. Mrs. Parmesi's home; her kitchen light was on. She's always complaining about the wireless being too loud. She'll hear quickly enough if you shout."

As she went to the door the bell sounded for the third time. Not a long, demanding ring. Just a reminder that he was still there.

She opened the door.

"When I follow a girl home," he said, "I always give her a minute or two to make herself tidy."

"What do you want?"

"If you'd listened out there in the street you'd have saved me climbing all these stairs."

"I don't want to talk to you."

"If you don't want to talk," said the man, "no one can make you. But you might as well listen to what I've got to say. It won't take all night."

"If you don't go away, I shall shout. There are people in the other flats—"

"That's all right," said the man genially. "You shout away. I'm not afraid of people."

For a long moment they looked at each other. Swords crossed, touched, and crossed again.

"Who are you?" said Miss Sennett.

"You know damned well who I am," said the man. "Or you'd have called the police ten minutes ago. I'm told it's quite a family likeness. But we don't want to talk about it all out here—or do we?"

"I—no—" She turned, and walked down the passage without another word.

The man smiled again. He came softly in behind her and shut the front door. Then he followed her into the lighted room.

"Now let's be polite. Invite me to sit down. You that side of the fire, me this. Domestic."

"You're Ted's brother," she said at last.

"The late Ted." His teeth showed. They were good teeth, white and strong as Ted's had been once, but a boot had got among them and after that he'd let them go. The more you looked at him the more you saw the likeness. The hard grey eyes. The mouth which seemed to have no upper lip.

"Yes."

Her voice was cooler. It was under control now. It had been the suddenness which had shocked her. To see the past walk out of the fog and wait for you, under the street lamp. It would shake anyone.

"I could use a drink," he said.

She went to the cupboard and took out a bottle of gin.

"Glad you keep up some of your bad habits."

"It's for my friends. I don't drink myself. And it's all I've got. If you want water with it you can get it from the tap."

The man took the glass, filled it full of gin and drank it smoothly. Then he filled it again, tipped a little into his mouth and sat savouring it.

He looked up suddenly and saw her eyeing him.

"Don't fuss," he said. "I won't get violent. Gin's mother's milk to me."

"I didn't know Ted had a brother."

"Introduce myself. The name is Les."

"What do you want?"

"A glass of this gin makes a nice start. We can move on to the rest—later."

His eyes rested thoughtfully on her. It was uncanny. He had

just that cock of the head that used to tell her that Ted was thinking up something wicked.

"You can say what you want and go away."

"What's the hurry? Ted won't come back. He's safe under three foot of quicklime in the prison yard. Isn't that where they put him? Oh, of course, you wouldn't know. You were inside at the time yourself."

"Listen," said Miss Sennett. "What's past is past. Nothing you can say can bring it back. I don't know why you've waited—nearly six years—"

"Seven years with time off for good behaviour. Violence. They're very hot on violence."

"I see. Well, that explains why I haven't had the pleasure of seeing you before—"

It was wasted on Les. He had planned the interview in advance. There were certain stages at which certain things were going to be said.

This happened to be one of them.

"Nice job you've got yourself?"

"I—"

"Don't fuss to make anything up. I found where you were working before I came to look you up. Diamond merchants. Hatton Garden. That's right, isn't it? And you're the boss's secretary. His confidential secretary. The one who brings him his hat and fetches the tea and listens to his secrets and says: 'Yes, Mr. Arkinshaw. No, Mr. Arkinshaw.'"

He tipped a little more gin into his mouth, and added: "I've got plenty of friends. They're interested in diamonds."

"No."

"No what?"

"You're not going to interfere with my job."

"Who says I'm not?"

"I do. Try that and I go to the police."

"And tell them what?"

Once again they looked at each other. Once again it was the uncanny resemblance that shook her nerve.

"Don't bluff," he said. "All we want from you is information. Inside information. No one need know about it. If it's the right information, we move in and clean up. It doesn't hurt anyone—except the insurance company. What are you scared of? Losing your job?" He paused.

"Or is Mr. Arkinshaw more than a boss to you? One word from me and you lose him and the job. Right?"

With terrifying suddenness he was on his feet beside her.

"On the other hand"—his fingers just brushed the side of her

face—"if you don't do us right, you might lose more than just a job. The prettiest girl goes to the bottom of the class when she's only got one ear."

He walked back to the table, picked up the gin bottle, corked it carefully and put it in his pocket. Then he was gone.

Miss Sennett sat still for a long time.

"It's an odd set-up," agreed Inspector Lugarde. "I don't know when I can remember an odder."

He sat in the armchair in Philip Arkinshaw's office and stared at his own highly polished toe-caps.

"You're sure of your facts?" said Mr. Arkinshaw.

"No doubt at all," said the Inspector. "The past is, as you might say, an open book. It's the future that's problematical."

"She doesn't look like a—what d'you call it?"

"They never do, sir. That's why they're useful. Just imagine you're going in for armed robbery. You're going to hold up a cinema—or a bank—or a post office. If you get caught the chances are you get caught quick. Something goes wrong with your getaway. The car breaks down, or crashes, and the crowd mobs you. That sort of thing. That's when it's going to make seven years of difference whether you've got a gun on you or not, you see."

"Yes," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "I can see that."

"But if this girl's right on the spot, ready to pick up the gun as soon as you've finished with it, that's tidy help. She's just an ordinary girl, an innocent-looking bystander. She can take the gun away, clean the prints off it, drop it in the river or post it to the Archbishop of Canterbury. You're clean. That's the point. Even if we get you sixty seconds later, it's going to be the devil of a job to pin armed robbery on you."

"And she did that—she was the red-head in the Ted Tarlo case?"

"That's her. Anna the red-head. You remember it now?"

"Certainly I do," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "Soon after the war, wasn't it? The papers made quite a splash. He came from Liverpool. She was a London girl whom he picked up. She wasn't very old."

"Seventeen," said the Inspector. "Quite a decent family. Her father was a solicitor's clerk. War bust the family up and she was on her own. Living in one room."

"And she—er—associated with him?"

"She married him," said the Inspector. "For better or worse. For crooked or straight. Towards the end we had our eyes on her, too, of course. She was searched three times, but we never

found a thing. I don't know to this day what she did with the gun—"

Quite suddenly Mr. Arkinshaw laughed. He threw himself back in his chair and abandoned himself to laughter.

"Our Miss Sennett," he gasped at last. "The byword in this office for efficiency, reliability, and respectability. The girl who has never been one minute late in the morning in five years. The best secretary I've ever had."

"Quite," said the Inspector. "And of course we don't know that she's anything but straight now."

"Of course we don't," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "I mean, of course we do. She's as straight as a die. I'd trust her with my last fiver."

"Yes?"

"Maybe I've got a simple mind," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "Of course, I'm not a policeman. But it seems obvious to me. She was only a girl. She may even have had the old-fashioned idea that a wife helps her husband. Then the big bust-up came. Instead of just threatening, Ted used his gun. Shot a post office man, didn't he?"

"That's right."

"Then there was the big trial. She was involved, of course. Ghastly business. He was found guilty and hanged. She got—?"

"Two years."

"A light sentence. Youth and mitigating circumstances. All right. So far as she was concerned, an episode was closed. New leaf. Trained herself. Worked hard. Got a job."

"Yes," said the Inspector.

Mr. Arkinshaw detected the note of reserve. "What do you mean?" he said indignantly. "You can't hound the wretched girl because she made a mistake years ago."

Inspector Lugarde seemed unmoved by this outburst.

"I don't hound people," he said. "I'm a policeman. I've got one job that matters. That is to prevent crime before it happens." There was a moment of silence that Mr. Arkinshaw did not seem anxious to break.

It was the Inspector who spoke. "How do you imagine," he said, "that we got on to Miss Sennett?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Arkinshaw. He was still troubled. "I suppose you keep an eye on people like that."

"Fssch," said the Inspector. "If we watched everybody who had ever been inside we'd need a sizable police force. No, sir. We were watching somebody, but not Miss Sennett. The name is Les Tarlo. That's right. Ted's younger brother. He came out of prison a month ago. A very dangerous person. I'm not

sure that I wouldn't say"—the Inspector considered the matter carefully—"one of the most dangerous young men on our books. And he's got a nice crowd round him. The remains of the Camden Town Barrow Gang. They went into temporary liquidation when we got Peter Pasco, and between you and me they're a rotten crowd who'd cut up their nearest and dearest if they saw a five-pound note in it. But if there's one thing that they get really excited about—it's diamonds."

"All right," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "But where does it touch—?"

"Miss Sennett? Until last week it didn't. But in the course of the last seven days, Les Tarlo has seen her three times. Possibly four. I think he made contact that night we had the fog. He slipped us then, so I couldn't be sure."

"Yes," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "But what are they after? She doesn't keep the keys of the safe."

"Do you ever carry diamonds about—loose, I mean?"

"Well—yes."

"Often?"

"When I have to." Mr. Arkinshaw felt that a word of explanation was called for. "Real top diamond buyers are few and far between," he said. "I make it my business to find out if they're in London. Then, if I think I've got anything which will interest them I nip round and see them. They don't come shopping. I've got to go after them. In fact, just as soon as we've finished, I've got a date with a Greek gentleman at the Dorchester. I thought he might like these—"

Mr. Arkinshaw dipped his hand into a fob pocket, fumbled with the concealed opening, and produced a wash-leather bag.

The Inspector examined the contents.

"Twelve thousand?" he suggested.

Mr. Arkinshaw chuckled. "I see you know your stones," he said. Then he became serious again.

"Are you suggesting—?"

"I'm not suggesting anything yet," said the Inspector. "But you can easily work out the angles for yourself. How often do you carry valuable stones? Once a fortnight? Less? All right. If the boys attack you blind, they're taking a fifteen to one chance that they'll find nothing on you. Odds like that don't appeal to them. If they're going to stick their necks out they like to be on a certainty. But if they only had someone who could tip them off—"

"I see," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "Yes. I see."

Miss Sennett sat at her elegant desk in the little room off Mr.

Philip Arkinshaw's room and did some thinking. She had had to think hard in her life before, but never as hard as she was thinking now.

Certain facts had not escaped her observant eye.

One was that her chief Philip Arkinshaw had started taking her into his confidence about his movements. Previously, if he had been going out to see a client, he might have told her or he might not. It was a question of whether the matter happened to crop up. Now it was different. Three times in the last three weeks he had gone right out of his way to tell her: "I'm going round to the Savoy this afternoon. I'm taking those stones we had from Roos. You might get me a taxi for four o'clock." And so on.

The first time that it happened she thought it might have been chance. The second, she was not so sure. The third time she was quite certain it wasn't.

That was one thing to think about.

Then there was Les Tarlo. She could keep him in play just so long but no longer.

And there were "the boys," who, she fancied, were pushing Les a little harder than he wanted to go. The Hogan brothers, and Minelli, the Maltese. She had met them once and had no desire to meet them again in any circumstances whatsoever.

And there was the unobtrusive-looking gentleman with the military moustache and the hard hat who had come twice already to see Mr. Arkinshaw. She reflected that if she had been a nice, ordinary girl he might not have meant much to her. As it was, she had placed him with accuracy, the first time she saw him.

The buzzer sounded over her desk.

When she went in Mr. Arkinshaw was standing in front of the fireplace. He was just one shade too casual.

"I'd like you," he said, "to get Lot Eight out of the safe."

"Lot Eight?" Her eyes opened a little. "Have we found a buyer?"

"I don't know yet. There's a man at the Donnington I think may be interested. But he can't see me until this evening."

"Then that means—you'll be keeping them out all night. Or could you put them in the hotel safe?"

"Hotel safe?" said Mr. Arkinshaw. "I've no great faith in hotel safes, not for packages like Lot Eight. I'll look after them all right. I'm safer than a hotel safe."

He smiled his slow smile. "And one other thing, I'd like you to come along."

"Me?" She tried not to sound surprised.

"If we get down to terms I want a note made of them. They'll

be quite complicated. He's buying on a blocked account. And whatever we agree, I want it typed out for signature by both of us, there and then."

"All right, Mr. Arkinshaw."

"Sorry to spoil your evening. As compensation I'm awarding you the rest of the afternoon off. No, that's all right. I mean it. You buzz along and get yourself kitted up. We shall have to have drinks with the man and be civil to him. It may develop into an evening. Have you got some sort of—er—cocktail dress, or something like that? Good. I'll meet you at seven o'clock in the foyer. You know the place? Turning off Curzon Street, opposite Shepherd Market."

"Thank you."

Whether she was being followed home she neither knew nor cared. She got home as fast as she could. There was a lot to be thought about. And a lot to be done. First, the telephone—

"It's been a lovely evening," said Miss Sennett. "And thank you again for the dinner."

"I couldn't send you home starving," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "Three glasses of sherry and six little biscuits don't constitute an evening meal for a hard-working girl. Anyway, we had something to celebrate, didn't we?"

"You think he'll buy?"

"He'll have an action for breach of contract if he doesn't," said Mr. Arkinshaw, fingering the paper in his pocket.

"All the same," she said, "I wish he'd taken over the stones this evening."

"Still worried? Wait here while I fetch a taxi."

He walked out into the darkness of Curzon Street, but found that he was being followed.

"I think I'll come with you, if you don't mind," she said rather breathlessly.

"O.K., bodyguard."

A lone taxi came cruising by and the driver gave them an exploratory look.

"I may be a mug," observed Mr. Arkinshaw. "But not as big a mug as that. We'll have a cab off the rank."

There was only one cab on the rank at the corner, and there was nothing suspicious about it except that it looked so decrepit that it was a wonder it held together.

"I'll drop you at your flat and then go on."

"That's rather roundabout," said Miss Sennett. "Considering that you live a lot nearer than I do. Why don't we drop you and I'll take the cab on?"

"All right," said Mr. Arkinshaw. He gave the driver his instructions.

"I only hope you've got a good safe at home," she said, as they swung out into Piccadilly.

"You've got an obsession about safes," said Mr. Arkinshaw calmly. "Very often they're not safes at all. They're unsafes. People break into my house tonight; they're looking for a very valuable parcel of diamonds—which they happen to know I've brought home with me . . ."

The taxi was passing a street lamp and the light fell full on him. Miss Sennett took a quick look at him, but his face was unreadable.

"Where do they look for them? If they know I've got a safe in my house their troubles are half over. All they've got to do is bust it open. But if I haven't—well, they've got a lot of searching to do."

"I suppose that's right," said Miss Sennett. "But where *would* you put them?"

The words came out before she had considered their implications, and she felt her face going hot.

Mr. Arkinshaw said, without any trace of hesitation: "I should put them in the refrigerator. Empty the ice-tray, put in more water, drop them in, and refreeze it."

"That certainly seems safe enough," said Miss Sennett. "Unless they get thirsty searching and decide to mix themselves a cool drink. Here we are."

The taxi drew up.

Mr. Arkinshaw got out, had a word with the driver, popped his head in again to say goodnight, then turned and walked up the shallow steps in front of his big house. He was feeling in his pocket for a latchkey. Miss Sennett watched him until the front door shut.

The taxi started slowly and grumbled off.

As it reached the corner Miss Sennett was still looking back. She was frowning. She leaned forward and tapped the glass.

"Stop, please," she said.

The taxi shuddered to a halt and she jumped out.

"Do I owe you anything?"

"No, that's all right, miss. The gentleman fixed it. But he told me to take you to—"

"I've changed my mind," she said. "It's quite all right. Goodnight."

The driver shrugged his shoulders and chugged off. Miss Sennett started to walk back the way she had come.

When she reached the house she stopped again. Her heart

was thumping. The house was absolutely dark. That was what had worried her. No lights at all. Nothing through the hall fanlight. Nothing through either of the front windows. Surely, when a man goes into his own house, he turns on some sort of light? Unless...

"Thump," said her heart. "He may have gone straight through to the kitchen at the back. And he's going to think it pretty odd—"

She pressed the front door bell. She could hear it ringing, far away but clear.

She waited for a full minute, then pressed the bell again. He must have heard it.

She seized the heavy bronze knocker, raised it, and beat it down. Once, twice.

The door opened silently, inward. An arm came out, caught her, and pulled her through. She was dragged, not gently, down the dark hall, where a chink of light showed. A door was opened, she was pushed in, and it snapped shut behind her.

It was a small, book-lined study. The one window was heavily curtained, and further blocked by a blanket which had been pinned over it. The only light came from a table light which stood in the corner.

Mr. Arkinshaw sat on the edge of the table. His coat had been torn open and he looked dishevelled, but still cheerful.

There were three other men in the room. Tarlo, the elder Hogan and Minelli. The young Hogan was the driver. He would be outside somewhere in the car.

"So you've come back to see the fun," said Mr. Arkinshaw looking at her, his head on one side.

"I didn't—"

"You keep quiet," said Tarlo. "Run her over, too." It was the Maltese who searched her. He did it very thoroughly and she saw Mr. Arkinshaw's mouth tightening and hoped he wasn't going to spoil things.

"She's clean," said Minelli. "No gun."

"All right. Go over there and sit beside him. That's right. Make yourself comfortable. Now then, there's something we want, and one of you's got it, or knows where it is. Either you've put it somewhere or it's hidden on you, in one of those clever pockets. We've got all night to find it—but the easiest way would be for you to tell us where it is. Easiest for you, I mean."

His eye seemed to rest thoughtfully, for a moment, on the electric fire, which was glowing dark red in the hearth.

Miss Sennett was shaking. Or seemed to be. Her whole body was jerking.

"You're wasting your time," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "I know just what you want. It isn't here. I left it in the safe at the Donnington Hotel."

"That's a lie," said Hogan. "I had my eye on them all the time. Let's get started on him. Or maybe if we roughed her up a bit he'd change his tune."

Miss Sennett had turned almost sideways on. She was more than touching Mr. Arkinshaw now. She was pressed against him. He sat with one hand behind him on the table to steady himself, and at this moment he felt something cold and heavy slide across the back of his knuckles and come to rest, half on his hand, half on the table.

Without moving his body he shifted his fingers until they were curled round it.

"I reckon we can make him sing," agreed Tarlo.

"Somehow," said Mr. Arkinshaw, "I doubt it."

It was the note of confidence in his voice that made them all look up.

"Ten seconds ago I might have believed you. Not now."

He brought his right hand from behind his back and the three men saw what was in it. They had nothing to say. Nothing at all.

"I warn you," went on Mr. Arkinshaw. "I'm not one of your crack shots, so I always aim for the middle of the stomach. Then I'm bound to hit something. That's right. Quite still, please. There's a telephone in the hall, Miss Sennett."

Some time afterwards Miss Sennett said: "You were taking an awful risk. Suppose I hadn't turned up?"

"I wasn't risking the diamonds, anyway," said Mr. Arkinshaw.

"You weren't—"

"I slipped them to the head waiter half-way through dinner. They were in the night safe in a Piccadilly bank before we'd finished our coffee. Now perhaps you can tell me something. I saw Minelli search you. Why didn't he find the gun?"

"That lout," said Miss Sennett contemptuously. "Why, in my day I've had a police searcher, who knew her job, run me over and miss a full-sized thirty-eight. What chance d'you think an amateur would have?"

"No doubt about it," said Mr. Arkinshaw. "The perfect secretary." It was hard to say whether he was smiling or not. "Finish your drink and I'll see if I can find a taxi for you. By the way, I expect you'll want a sleep-in after all this. I'll warn them at the office not to expect you till lunch-time."

"Really, Mr. Arkinshaw, that will be quite unnecessary," said Miss Sennett.

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WAGON TRAIN



MY NAME IS ADAMS. My job to lead settlers—the Wagon Train—to the West. Maybe it's hard to realize the dangers of these journeys. No single wagon could possibly make it. I gather the folk together. They come from the East and they sign up with me to travel the unknown dangerous country—Indian country, across deserts, over mountains where snow lies and where a man can freeze to death. It's no easy trek ; it's tough enough on the men, tougher still on their women-folk. But they travel in hope—a fresh start in a fresh country that holds a promise for the future.

This is my job and together with Flint McCullough who scouts for the train—I reckon he's the best Indian scout in the country—we push through. We and the people you're going to read about—people like Wallace Carey.

THE WALLACE CAREY STORY

"THE name's Adams, Major Adams," the older man said.
Wallace said: "Wallace Carey."

"Guess that makes us proper acquainted." He was on the ground now, kneeling. Stubby fingers pulling the shirt away from the arrow. "Steady, boy."

"I'm fine," Wallace Carey said.

The nearer of the two men was not young any more. He could have been anything between forty and fifty, and there were too many lines etched on the heavy face to tell if it was years that had caused them or the sun. The body beneath the face was heavy too. Heavy but not flabby, because even through the coarse blue flannel of the army pattern shirt one could tell that the chest was as solid and muscled as the bare, hairy arms that rested across the horse's neck like the branches of an old tree.

Lying with his back against the wagon wheel, with the taste of blood in his mouth and his shoulder still numb from the arrow but due to hurt very soon, Wallace found himself thinking fleetingly about the authority of experience, because it was the best sort of authority as long as the strength lasted out. This man was like an older bull who knew everything and could still lick any youngster in the herd. Not for ever. Not tomorrow, maybe. But today he had it all.

After a while Wallace shifted his eyes to the second rider, placing him easily, without ever having seen him before. A man almost as young as himself, lean, hatchet faced, bronze of skin. Pale buckskins, fringed and fancy. The broad belt with its low-hung gun and wide-bladed skinning knife. The older man was a trail boss, Wallace thought. This second rider his scout.

He eased his back against the wheel and gathered the spittle in his mouth. Then he swallowed and spoke carefully.

He said: "I'm obliged."

The scout had got down now, and he and the older man were lifting him across the latter's horse. They weren't asking him if he wanted it that way, and he said: "Wait. I got to get my things together—"

"There ain't nothin' to get together," the scout said. His eyes were taking in the burnt-out wagon, the strips of leather where the horses had been cut out from their traces. An arrow stuck in the rim of a charred wheel. Not asking a question, he said: "Sioux."

"There was six of them," Wallace Carey said. He thought there had been six. In the first awful moment when they had come up behind him there could have been any number, but even in the despair of that time he had somehow noticed that the party that was about to kill him had been a small one. He said bitterly: "I didn't do a damn thing."

The scout smiled suddenly, his teeth white against the copper red of his face. "You kept your scalp. That's more than most folks aim to do."

The man called Major Adams looked up at him. "All right, Flint. You tell us why?"

The fringed shoulders lifted. "I ain't sayin' what I don't know, Major. Maybe they saw our wagons. Maybe Sioux don't take this time of year. Then agin, boy here's got red hair. Kind of holy, red hair."

Slumped forward in the saddle Wallace felt a man mount behind him. "Better get back to the wagons," Major Adams' voice said. "Lucky for you, youngster, we saw your smoke."

Forcing himself to be rational, Wallace Carey said politely: "Hope I ain't holding you up none."

"You ain't holdin' us up at all," Major Adams said. "We were stopped anyway."

Behind the bowed head of the boy he smiled, remembering the way it had been, with five miles still to go to where the butts rose broad and solid against the sky and the long, scattered line of the wagon train grinding itself to a stop. Watching the wagons from the extra height afforded him by a single outcrop of rock, Adams had seen it happening without at first understanding the reason. All he had known was what he could see—the sudden heavy splash of white a mile or so ahead where a wagon had stopped, and the next half dozen wagons following it had lost station and closed up tight. He had sworn roundly, and still swearing had nevertheless waited till he had seen the outriders spurring their ponies back along the line, waving the rest of the plodding wagons down. Not until he had satisfied himself that order was being restored had Adams moved himself. Then he had cantered forward towards the first of the stationary wagons.

Pa Rockwell had been trying to fix it. Watching him, Adams had felt his mouth twitch and found himself wondering why he hadn't thought of the Rockwells immediately.

He'd said carefully: "Havin' trouble there, Mr. Rockwell?" Listening to himself, he found time to wonder again about the automatic "Mr." Anyone else in his situation would have been "Pa" Rockwell to his face, supposing one didn't call him by his given name. But somehow where Edward Rockwell was concerned, folks just naturally called him "Mr." And not because he wanted it that way, but because that was the way people felt about him, whether he wanted them to or not.

The owner of the wheel had looked up at him—a man of perhaps sixty and still wearing the black tail coat he'd got used to in other days. A pale, bony face with blue eyes above the white moustache, that looked down with gravely incompetent concern at a wheel that had slipped its axle yet once again.

Edward Rockwell had said mildly: "I regret we appear to have caused this further delay."

"Forget it," Adams had said. He had looked at the sheared pin of the wheel and wondered if Rockwell had even known it was sheared. Worried, he had let his eyes go over the family, from the straight, proud old man to the wife who was still soft faced and attractive, and whose clothes were city bought and not even patched. The girl, Harriet, who at eighteen really was beautiful. Hell fire, Adams had thought, what made people come out west who were so damn foolishly out of place? And then he'd thought that one might as well ask what brought anyone out here. Every man's reason was his own, just as every man's sorrow or crime or loss or escape was his own. One just didn't ask about it, that was all.

He'd said: "Looks like you're havin' trouble with that pin."

"Yes," Rockwell had said. "Yes, Major. The pin." He'd looked at the pin then, and Adams had known that he'd been right and that Rockwell hadn't even known of it before.

Adams had said carefully: "Lucky you ain't on your own, I guess. Fixin' a pin ain't a thing any man wants to do on his own." He'd picked out a couple of men with his eyes. "Charlie. Red. Guess you might be givin' Mr. Rockwell a hand."

Why had he done it that way? Adams wondered, thinking back. But he knew the reason well enough. He'd done it that way because when a man was proud the way Rockwell was proud you didn't rub his face in the dirt because of the things he didn't know. God knew there had been times he'd cursed the day he'd agreed to take the Rockwells along. But hell, he thought, it hadn't worked out so bad. Maybe if the wagons hadn't stopped they wouldn't have got around to picking up this boy, so by and large it balanced out. Over the years it usually did.

Over his shoulder he said to Flint: "We'll take him to my

wagon," and as he came abreast of the first of the waiting team he found himself looking automatically for either of the two men who'd been told off to help Rockwell with his wheel. His eyes picked up Charlie Bush, not knowing that they held a look of query and yet accepting the nod of confirmation that all was now well. Someone called out: "Who you got there, Major?" but he didn't answer, because the figure across the saddle bow had slumped all the way forward now. Adams grunted, thinking that with the arrow still to get out, that had worked out for the best too.

He was still looking at Wallace Carey half an hour later, only by now the boy was lying in the back of the wagon. When Wallace Carey opened his eyes his arm was hurting, but when he saw who it was looking down at him he managed to grin, and Major Adams said: "How are you now, boy?"

"I *am* eighteen," Wallace Carey said.

"Sure. How are you feeling?" Adams didn't call him boy any more, Wallace Carey noticed.

He said: "I'm fine, an' I'm obliged to you. I'll just rest awhile an' then I'll be goin'."

"Goin' with what?" Adams tipped his broad-brimmed hat forward to save his eyes from the sun. "What'll you ride on, Carey? Or are you aimin' on walkin' to California?"

Wallace Carey looked at him, not seeing him or the ridge pole of the wagon behind or anything other than the realization that what the trail boss said was true. That whatever he had had two hours ago he was now a man without possessions. A man who could not protect himself because he had no gun. Who could not ride because he had no horse. A man—

"Take it easy," the major said. "Like as not folks will give a hand. Happened a while back when we found a girl—"

"I don't want things folk give me," Wallace Carey said.

"Folks want to give you a hand here and there, feller can't hardly refuse."

The boy said bleakly: "I don't want nothin' from nobody."

"Thanksgivin' tomorrow," the major said.

He had forgotten the date, but Wallace Carey knew it was truly Thanksgiving when he saw the horse. Not all that good a horse but young and strong in the shoulder, strawberry coloured and with a blaze beneath its left eye. The horse was tethered to a tree a hundred yards away from the unlimbered wagons and in spite of the day of rest and the good water, the smell of chicken and cake, for the boy only the horse was Thanksgiving. A day set aside, for family business and remembering and making sport.

One of the men round the horse said: "Here Carey, come win yourself a horse."

Wallace Carey looked at the men. Twenty, thirty of them in shirt sleeves and singlets, with a keg of liquor set up here and there. Twenty-five yards away, lined up on a rock, was a row of beat-up cans. Wallace Carey had heard the shooting earlier, lying silent in Major Adams' wagon. Now he knew why as he smelled the burnt powder smell in the air.

He said: "What do I have to do?"

A gap toothed little man with a pot belly pushed a gun in his hand. "Snap shootin'. Six seconds and as many cans as you can from the drop of a hat. Matt Summers here got three. Only Flint McCullough an' you to go."

Wallace Carey looked round for the scout, finding the long line of him sprawled out on the grass, sucking a straw. He saw Wallace and took the straw out of his mouth. He said: "Go ahead youngster an' do what he says. Win yourself a horse."

A horse was more than a horse. It was escape. It was getting away and being himself again, Wallace Carey thought. Almost, it was like being before the Indians came. He looked down at the gun he held and hefted it in his hand. An old gun, one of the early Peacemakers with a big sight on the barrel and a walnut stock worn smooth. An old gun but a good one.

He said: "I'm obliged to you for the loan of the gun." Then he waited till someone dropped a hat, and as it fell the barrel came up smoothly like it should and at the top of the swing he fired, arm outstretched, letting the recoil lift the pistol and letting it fall, and firing and feeling the solid bar of his arm lift and fall to fire again, hearing nothing of the heavy thump of the gun but only the spinning clatter of the cans.

"Holy God, he got five," someone said.

Wallace Carey saw then that there was only one can left upstanding. It was good, though not as good as he had hoped. He felt the first and only gratitude he felt in life for his father because when he had been drunk he had always taken it into his head to teach his son to aim and fire a gun.

He emptied out the spent cases, blew through the cylinders and handed the gun back butt first. "I'm obliged," he said again.

Then he waited. He waited while the cans were set up and Flint McCullough got to his feet, standing not as the farmers and teamsters stood, but lightly and with the air of a man who knew what he had to do. Watching him, Wallace Carey knew that all he knew about handguns this man also knew, and then the hat fell again and the scout drew a long barrelled, new, double action and it crashed six times, one explosion blending into the next.

There was a long moment's pause and then the crowd said:
"Four!"

The scout shrugged his shoulders and nodded at Wallace Carey, sliding the gun back.

"Looks like you gotten yourself a horse."

Wallace Carey nodded, not trusting himself to speak. No money and no gun. But he had a horse now. The others, too, would come.

Then someone behind him sniggered and said audibly:
"Looks like some folks can do any damn thing with a gun. Even miss when they want to."

A silence fell. Listening to it, Wallace Carey knew that he was going white, and he felt the men's eyes on him. He looked at Flint and heard a voice that was strangely unlike his own say:
"Is it true?"

"Hell, boy," the scout said, "I missed, didn't I? Go get the horse. It's yours."

"You missed on purpose," Wallace Carey said. "You was givin' me the horse."

"For God's sake," the scout said, "I got me a horse. What do I want another one for?"

Wallace swung at him and felt the fist connect with Flint McCullough's face and the jar of the blow running up his arm. He saw the surprise jumping into the other's eyes and then a rather terrible, flat anger and then all at once a hand had clamped on to his shoulder from behind, swinging him round.

"Leave him, Flint," Major Adams said. "Then to his prisoner: Get back to the God damned wagon an' stay there."

For a long moment Wallace Carey stared back into the pale slits of the wagonmaster's eyes, seeing in them not the cold, killing rage that had welled up in Flint's but a father's rage, quick and tangible and hot.

"All right, Major Adams," Wallace Carey said.

He went and waited by the wagon. After a while the major came. He came on his own, the anger still in his face. But now there was a curiosity there as well.

He said: "What's the matter with you, boy? Reckon you're too good to take a little help?"

"I like it on my own," Wallace Carey said.

Major Adams rolled a cigarette. After he'd lit it he said:
"Nobody likes it on their own. You got no folks?"

"I ain't got no one," Wallace Carey told him. "Like I said."

"How long since?"

How long was it? Wallace Carey wondered. He made an effort to remember, then: "Since I was ten. Ma got ill and

died that winter and Pa was always drunk anyhow. Beat the town up one night and ended up in jail."

Major Adams said: "An' you?"

"Should've had the farm, I guess," Wallace Carey said. He saw it again, just saying the words. The small white homestead against the friendly countryside. The stacked wood for the winter against the barn door. The red and white cows. Then he smiled: "Only it turned out Pa had drunk it all. Near every damn thing was sold."

"An' then?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "Went workin' for folks nearby. Judge said I should, 'count they said I was under age an' they'd look after me." Once more came memory. Five o'clock in the morning, mucking out in the cold winter's dark. The aching hunger and the beatings and the small boy weeping under his single worn blanket in the wood store. And then at last not weeping.

He said: "I was a new sort of hired hand. Didn't have to get paid none. Lit out on my own."

"At ten?" Major Adams said.

"Eleven," Wallace Carey said. "Couldn't hardly have been worse'n where I was. Reckoned I was better on my own."

"An' were you?"

No bitterness in the answer. Just reflection. "Sure. Got a place together after a while. Thirty acres an' a dozen head I had when I was just goin' on sixteen." For just a moment he found himself thinking about those years and all that had gone into them. He said: "Was last winter that fixed me. That an' the bank at Mallow Hill foreclosing an' all that." Then in explanation: "Didn't want no mortgage but there weren't nothin' else I could do. Then the Middle East Bank started after its money, an' the winter bein' like I said there weren't none." He kicked a wheel reflectively. "Knew from the start I did wrong in bein' beholden to anyone, least of all a bank. They sold me up an' after a bit I got a stake together an' came out here on my own."

Adams said carefully: "I can see that maybe you haven't over much reason to put your trust in folks."

The boy said without heat: "No, sir. I ain't got none. A feller can't trust nobody but himself."

Adams said tentatively: "Maybe a girl?"

"I ain't had no time for girls."

God, Adams thought, he can't have had time for anything but work and being let down. He said aloud: "Well you'll have no time for girls here either, because I ain't givin' anyone free passage to California."

Wallace Carey said: "I said I don't want charity. I'll work."
"There's a family called Rockwell needs a man," Adams said.
"You'll work for them."

It should have been like the other job he'd had, long ago, only somehow it wasn't. He was bound to this job too by authority, and there was no pay at the end of it, but this time there was more to it than that.

"Your Pa farmed before?" He'd asked the question right out on the evening of the first day. He'd fixed the horses and greased the axles and was out finding wood for the fire when he looked up and saw the Rockwell girl.

Her hair was loose and the skin of her face sort of pink because of the light from the setting sun. She looked clean and good and wholesome, like something fresh picked from the soil.

"No," Harriet Rockwell had said. She had the same way of talking as her Ma and Pa. Reminded him of a schoolmistress who'd taught him quite a while ago before his mother died, yet acceptable for all that. "No, my father hasn't ever farmed before."

"No," Wallace Carey had said. "I didn't rightly think he had." They sat awhile talking while the shadows lengthened, talking about California and the way it would be. Of tomorrow and the day after. Not of yesterday.

Diffidently, the girl had said: "Please help my father all you can." She had not said "help all of us," but he had known she had meant as much.

He'd said: "Don't go frettin'. We'll do what we can." Then: "Reckon your Pa would let me drive the team tomorrow?"

Harriet had said: "I expect so. Why?"

It was because the left-hand lead horse's mouth was bad with Pa Rockwell pulling on it, and he'd need to be gentled for a few days. But he had said nothing of that. Only: "It ain't nothin'. Just so as I do what I can."

It had got to be a pattern. Not slowly, but quickly, so that after a while it seemed as though he'd been eating Ma Rockwell's pancakes for the best part of a long time. Curiously, she was a good and capable cook, though making do with a wood fire was something he could see she was learning slow. But even though she was not his kind, Wallace Carey saw that she was a proper family woman, just as there was a quickness and eagerness to know about the girl. It was just that Pa was slow. There was so little he could do right, and even when you showed him how, he'd forget and be no better the next time. Almost it was, Wallace

Carey thought, as if he was a man born with no skill in his hands, so that they failed to respond like those of other men. And yet he would try to do the work.

"It ain't needed, ma'am," Wallace Carey said time and again to Harriet's mother in the still, blue dark evenings. Rockwell would be away, making light of the flayed hand, the torn thumb-nail, the bruise across the arm or whatever scar had been left him by the day. "It ain't needed. Mr. Rockwell can sit in the wagon. What's needed, I'll do."

But she would only shake her head and say: "Let him do what he can, Wallace. He's learning."

"He's mighty slow to learn. He ain't a young man."

"No. Not any more."

Day after day, slipping, almost unnoticed by himself, into first this job, then that. Watching the two women, one so young, coming along well and strengthening, watching at long last Pa Rockwell no longer fighting so hard. Still willing, but now and then sitting back, leaving the work to the younger man.

"What are you hoping for in California, Wallace?" Harriet asked him one night, sitting high above the creaking axle beam, watching the team find its way by the stars.

He'd said without hesitation: "The chance to be my own man again," and knew as he said it that it was still true. It was better than he had ever thought it could be, here with the Rockwells. But better still to get away. He sat half the day through dreaming of horses, with another man's reins in his hands.

And then, utterly without warning, the chance came. It came swiftly and in sudden, wanton destructiveness in the shape of twenty young Sioux, mad drunk on stolen liquor, dropping like a bolt from the hills, riding bunched and close together and heedless of anything save some sort of lust to kill.

They rode in from open hillsides half a mile away, and after the first surge of remembered fear, Wallace Carey knew that almost all of them would die when they came within range of the wagon train's guns. Almost he found himself hoping that they would stop or swerve or become suddenly sober and go back. Instead they did none of these things and the slugs from fifty rifles tore most of them apart, so that there was a sudden smoke-dimmed shambles of screaming horses and shouting men and a single naked rider shrieking as he rode alone through the wagon line, until something inside Wallace Carey snapped and he dropped on the Indian's back from the top of the Rockwells' wagon, stabbing between the sweating copper ribs with Ma Rockwell's best carving knife, and dropping the dead man to the ground from the back of his own pony. And suddenly again

Flint McCullough standing in front of him with blood all down his face and laughing, saying: "Well, Carey, this time you really have gotten yourself a horse."

A horse and a looted Winchester still grasped in the Sioux's dead hand.

Pa Rockwell standing behind him saying: "To the victor the spoils. Take them, Wallace. Force is the only right in time of war."

A day, a few days, Wallace Carey thought, to make the parting decent. Then he'd take what was his and up and go.

He slept easy that night and rose early to get wood, not feeling surprised to meet Harriet on the same errand in the chill of the dawn. Not waiting for him to speak of what was in his mind she said: "You'll be going soon. We'll miss you."

He said: "Your Pa will be all right. He's a willing man. He'll learn."

"Yes," Harriet said. She picked up a wood chip and looked at it. "It's been hard for him."

"He's an educated man," Wallace Carey said. "A school teacher or such, I guess."

She looked up quickly, shaking her head. "No. He was a banker. He ran the Middle East Bank at Mallow Hill."

Very still in the dawn, with only the snickering of the loose horses in the distance. He picked up a piece of wood himself and said in his ordinary voice: "Seems like I've heard of it." His farm and the small home, and the few steers he'd got together slowly with sweat and his own hands, that had been taken from him. "*The governors and trustees of the Middle East Bank much regret—*"

"I didn't understand it all," Harriet was saying, "but things were bad for a lot of small banks about a year ago. They said my father should have got out while he could, only he wouldn't. He said he had to keep faith with his customers. He put all his own money into the bank, and then he sold our house and put the money for that in too. Only there wasn't enough because people didn't believe he was honest and kept drawing it out. In the end there just wasn't any more money and father was ruined, and we were penniless. That's why we came out west. To start again."

"He's an honest man," Wallace Carey said. He wasn't talking to the girl, but she wasn't to know that because she said: "Of course he's an honest man. Did you think he wasn't?"

Wallace Carey said: "One doesn't always know."

He thought of Pa Rockwell trying to learn the things he would

never learn properly now. Pa Rockwell with his raw hands and his quiet smile, taking it and being able to take it because even though he was poor he was still an honourable man. Hard to realize that Rockwell and the man at the bank had been one and the same. That it hadn't just been another let down. To realize that hard things were not always spite but could be fair and decent enough in their own way.

"When will you be going?" the girl asked.

He looked into the future, seeing himself as one man alone again and for some reason not wanting it any more. Not wanting it because the Rockwells couldn't really do without him now. If he went, Wallace Carey thought, who'd fix the harness and see to the animals' feed? Grease the gear and shake things down for the night? When they got to California, what would Pa Rockwell do on a homestead without a man to guide him? He thought: *You're gettin' yourself a job as a hired hand. Get out while you can.* He looked at Harriet and the wind was blowing the hair into her eyes and she looked very young and soft and pretty and yet somehow strong. And a voice inside him said: *These are my folks*, and he knew that the loneliness was gone out of him and he wanted it this way.

"Please tell me when you're going," the girl said.

He straightened his back. "Maybe I'll wait a bit. Get your old man to California, eh?" He turned away so that he shouldn't see what was in her eyes. One day he would be entitled to see, but not yet. Enough was enough for the day.

"Best be gettin' back," Wallace Carey said. He looked westwards, across the great green plain, knowing it was time to get the team horses harnessed up because they got a long way to go that day.

Well, that's the Wallace Carey story, and there is nothing like the westward haul for a man to be able to prove himself.

I guess you can see that it is quite a responsibility for me, Seth Adams, leading these folk to their goal.

Next month we'll tell you about Jesse Wynter, another man whose eyes are fixed on the West.

"Forward the wagons . . ."

Wife of archaeologist Professor Max Mallowan whom she met when he was digging up Ur, Agatha Christie is tall, ample, good-looking, fond of Bach, hats, playing bridge and making omelettes! Writing is sheer hard work but ideas come easily, and someone once said that she had made more money out of murder than anyone of her sex since Lucretia Borgia. She is willing to polish off her victims by any known means, but prefers poison on the whole: "There is nothing to beat good old arsenic in the beer or cyanide in a nice cupatea." Poisoning is tidy, and she learnt all about it when she trained as a nurse in World War One.

In April this year the author of the longest running play in all theatre history turned her back on the excitement and took off once more for Baghdad, where there is work to do, exciting things to unearth, and you're twenty miles at least from the nearest telephone.

DOUBLE ALIBI

By AGATHA CHRISTIE

HERCULE POIROT sat on the white sand and looked out across the sparkling blue water. He was carefully dressed, even dandified in his white flannels, and a large panama hat protected his head. He belonged to the old-fashioned generation which believed in covering itself carefully from the sun, whereas Miss Pamela Lyall, who sat beside him and talked ceaselessly, represented the modern school of thought, wearing the barest minimum of clothing on her sun-browned person. Occasionally her flow of conversation stopped while she reanointed herself from a bottle of oily fluid which stood beside her on the sand.

On the farther side of Miss Pamela Lyall her friend, Miss Sarah Blake, lay face downwards on a gaudily-striped towel. Miss Blake's tanning was flawless and her friend cast dissatisfied glances at her more than once.

"I'm so patchy still," she murmured regretfully. "M. Poirot—*would* you mind? Just below the right shoulder-blade—I can't reach to rub it in."

M. Poirot obliged and then wiped his oily hand carefully on his handkerchief. Miss Lyall, whose principal interests in life were the observation of people around her, and the sound of her own voice, continued to talk.

"I was right about that woman—the one in the *Chanel* model—it is Valentine Dacres—Chantry, I mean. I thought it was. I recognized her at once. She's really rather marvellous, isn't she? I mean I can understand how people go quite crazy about her. She just obviously *expects* them to! That's half the battle. Those other people who came last night are named Gold. He's terribly good-looking."

"Honeymooners?" murmured Sarah.

Miss Lyall shook her head with an air of experience.

"Oh, no—her clothes aren't *new* enough. You can always tell brides! Don't you think it's the most fascinating thing in the world to watch people, M. Poirot, and see what you can find out about them by just looking?"

"Not just looking, darling," Sarah pointed out. "You ask a lot of questions, too."



"I haven't even spoken to the Golds yet," said Miss Lyall with dignity. "And anyway I don't see why one shouldn't be interested in one's fellow-creatures. Human nature is simply fascinating. Don't you think so, M. Poirot?"

This time she paused long enough to allow her companion to speak. Without taking his eyes off the blue water, M. Poirot replied: "*Ça dépend.*"

Pamela was shocked. "Oh, M. Poirot! I don't think anything's so interesting, so *incalculable* as a human being!"

"Incalculable? That, no."

"Oh, but they *are*. Just as you think you've got them beautifully taped, they do something completely unexpected."

Hercule Poirot shook his head. "No, no, that is not true. It is most rare that anyone does an action that is not *dans son caractère*. It is in the end monotonous."

Sarah turned her head sideways and asked, "You think that human beings tend to reproduce certain patterns? Stereotyped patterns?"

"*Précisément*," said Poirot, and traced a design in the sand with his finger.

"What's that you're drawing?" asked Pamela curiously.

"A triangle," said Poirot.

But Pamela's attention had been diverted elsewhere.

"Here come the Chantrys," she said.

A woman was coming down the beach—a tall woman, very conscious of herself and her body. She gave a half nod and a smile and sat down a little distance away on the beach. The scarlet and gold wrap slipped down from her shoulders. She was wearing a white bathing suit.

Pamela sighed. "Hasn't she got a lovely figure?"

But Poirot was looking at her face—the face of a woman of thirty-nine who had long been famous for her beauty.

He knew, as everyone knew, all about Valentine Chantry. She had been famous for many things—for her caprices, her wealth, her enormous sapphire-blue eyes, her matrimonial ventures and adventures. She had had five husbands and numerous lovers. She had in turn been the wife of an Italian count, of an American steel magnate, of a tennis professional, of a racing motorist. Of these four the American had died, but the others had been shed negligently in the divorce court and six months ago she had married a fifth time—a commander in the Royal Navy.

It was he who came striding down the beach behind her. Silent, dark, with a pugnacious jaw and a sullen manner. A touch of the *primaeval* ape about him.

She said, "Tony darling—my cigarette-case . . ."

He had it ready for her, lighted her cigarette, helped her to slip the straps of the white bathing suit from her shoulders. She lay, arms outstretched in the sun.

Pamela said, her voice just lowered sufficiently:

"You know they interest me *frightfully*. He's such a brute! So silent and—sort of *glowering*. I suppose a woman of her kind likes that. It must be like controlling a tiger! I wonder how long it will last—she gets tired of them very soon, I believe. All the same, if she tries to get rid of him, I think he might be dangerous."

Another couple came down the beach, a little shyly. They were the newcomers of the night before. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Gold, as Miss Lyall knew from her inspection of the hotel visitors' book.

"Good morning, isn't it a lovely day?" she called out to them.

Mrs. Gold was a small woman. She was not bad-looking—indeed, her features were regular and her complexion good, but she had a certain mouse-like air of diffidence and dowdiness that made her liable to be overlooked. Her husband, on the other hand, was dramatically good-looking. Very fair, crisply curling hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, narrow hips. He looked more like a young man on the stage than a young man in real life, but the moment he opened his mouth that impression faded. He was quite natural and unaffected, perhaps even a little stupid.

Mrs. Gold looked gratefully at Pamela and sat down near her.

"What a lovely shade of brown you are. I feel terribly underdone!"

"One has to take a lot of trouble to brown evenly," sighed Miss Lyall. She paused a minute and then went on: "You've only just arrived, haven't you?"

"Yes. Last night. We came on the *Vapo d'Italia* boat."

"Have you ever been to Rhodes before?"

"No. It is lovely, isn't it?"

A little way along the beach, Valentine Chantry stirred and sat up. With one hand she held her bathing suit in position across her breast.

She yawned—a wide yet delicate and cat-like yawn. She glanced casually down the beach, her eyes slanting past Marjorie Gold and lingering thoughtfully on the crisp, golden head of Douglas Gold. She moved her shoulders sinuously. She spoke and her voice was raised a little higher than it need have been.

"Tony darling—isn't it divine—this sun? I simply *must* have been a sun worshipper once, don't you think?"

Her husband grunted something that failed to reach the others. Valentine Chantry went on in that high, drawling voice.

"Just pull that towel a little flatter, will you, darling?"

She took infinite pains in the resettling of her beautiful body. Douglas Gold was looking now. His eyes were frankly interested.

Mrs. Gold chirped happily in a subdued key to Miss Lyall.

"What a beautiful woman!"

Pamela, as delighted to give as to receive information, murmured, "That's Valentine Chantry—you know, who used to be Valentine Dacres—she is rather marvellous, isn't she? He's simply crazy about her, won't let her out of his sight!"

Mrs. Gold looked once more along the beach. Then she said, "The sea really is lovely—so blue. I think we ought to go in now, don't you, Douglas?"

He was still watching Valentine Chantry and took a moment or two to answer. Then he said, rather absently:

"Go in? Oh, yes, rather, in a minute."

Marjorie Gold got up and strolled down to the water's edge.

Valentine Chantry rolled over a little on one side, her eyes seeking out Douglas Gold. Her scarlet mouth curved faintly into a smile. The neck of Mr. Douglas Gold became slightly red.

Valentine Chantry said: "Tony darling, would you mind? I want a little pot of face cream—it's on the dressing-table. I meant to bring it down. Do get it for me, there's an angel."

The commander rose obediently and stalked off into the hotel.

Marjorie Gold plunged into the sea, calling out:

"It's lovely, Douglas—so warm. Do come!"

Pamela Lyall said to him, "Aren't you going in?"

He answered vaguely, "Oh! I like to get hotted up first."

Valentine Chantry stirred. She picked up a flask of sun-bathing oil. She had some difficulty with it—the screw top seemed to resist her efforts.

She spoke loudly and petulantly. "Oh, dear—I can't get this thing undone!" She looked towards the other group. "I wonder—"

Always gallant, Poirot rose to his feet, but Douglas Gold had the advantage of youth and suppleness. He was by her side in a moment. "Can I do it for you?"

"Oh, thank you—" It was the sweet, empty drawl again. "You are kind. I'm such a *fool* at undoing things. I always seem to screw them the wrong way. Oh, you've done it! Thank you ever so much—"

Hercule Poirot smiled to himself.

He got up and wandered along the beach in the opposite direction. He did not go very far but his progress was leisurely, and when he was on his way back Mrs. Gold came out of the sea and joined him. She had been swimming. Her face, under a singularly unbecoming bathing cap, was radiant.

She said breathlessly, "I do love the sea, and it's so warm. Douglas and I are simply mad on bathing. He can stay in for hours."

Hercule Poirot's eyes slid over her shoulder to the spot on the beach where that enthusiastic bather, Mr. Douglas Gold, was sitting talking to Valentine Chantry.

"I can't think why he doesn't come in . . ." There was a note of childish bewilderment in Mrs. Gold's voice.

Poirot's eyes rested thoughtfully on Valentine Chantry. He thought that other women in their time had made the same remark. Beside him, he heard Mrs. Gold draw in her breath sharply.

She said—and her voice was cold—"She's supposed to be very attractive, I believe. But Douglas doesn't like that type of woman."

Hercule Poirot did not reply and Mrs. Gold plunged into the sea again, swimming away from the shore with slow, steady strokes. He retraced his steps to the group on the beach.

It had been augmented by the arrival of old General Barnes, a veteran who liked the company of the young. He was sitting now between Pamela and Sarah, and he and Pamela were engaged in exchanging various scandals with appropriate embellishments. Commander Chantry had returned from his errand. He and Douglas Gold were sitting on either side of Valentine.

Valentine was sitting up very straight between the two men and talking. She talked easily and lightly in her sweet, drawling voice, turning her head to take first one man and then the other into the conversation. She was just finishing an anecdote.

"—and what do you think the foolish man said? 'It may have been only a minute, but I'd remember you *anywhere*, ma'am!' Didn't he, Tony? And you know, I thought it was so *sweet* of him. I do think it's such a kind world—I mean, everybody is so frightfully kind to *me* always—I don't know why, they just are. But I said to Tony—d'you remember, darling—'Tony, if you want to be a teeny-weeny bit jealous, you can be jealous of that commissioner.' Because he really was too adorable . . ."

There was a pause and Douglas Gold said, "Good fellows, some of these commissioners."

"Oh, yes, but he took such trouble—an immense amount of trouble—and seemed just pleased to be able to help me."

Douglas Gold said: "Nothing odd about that. Anyone would for you, I'm sure."

She cried delightedly: "How nice of you! Tony, did you hear that?"

Commander Chantry grunted.

His wife sighed. "Tony never makes pretty speeches, do you, my lamb?" Her white hand with its long red nails ruffled up his dark head. He gave her a sudden sidelong look.

She murmured: "I don't really know how he puts up with me. He's frightfully clever—absolutely frantic with brains—and I just go on talking nonsense the whole time, but he doesn't seem to mind. Nobody minds what I do or say—everybody spoils me. I'm sure it's frightfully bad for me."

Commander Chantry said across her to the other man: "That your Missus in the sea?"

"Yes. Expect it's about time I joined her."

"But it's so lovely here in the sun," murmured Valentine. "Tony darling, I don't think I shall actually *bathe* today—not my first day. I might get a chill or something. But why don't you go in now, Tony darling? Mr.—Mr. Gold will stay and keep me company while you're in."

Chantry said grimly: "No, thanks. Shan't go in just yet. Your wife seems to be waving to you, Gold."

"How well your wife swims," said Valentine. "I'm sure she's one of those terribly efficient women who do everything well. They always frighten me so because I feel they despise me. I'm so frightfully bad at everything—an absolute duffer, aren't I, Tony darling?"

Commander Chantry grunted.

His wife murmured affectionately: "You're too sweet to admit it. Men are so wonderfully loyal—that's what I like about them. I do think men are so much more loyal than women—and they never say nasty things. Women, I always think, are so *petty*."

"Mrs. Gold's coming out," announced Pamela.

"Here we come gathering nuts in May," hummed Sarah. "Here comes his wife to fetch him away . . ."

Mrs. Gold came straight up the beach. "Aren't you coming, Douglas?" she demanded impatiently. "The sea is lovely and warm."

Douglas Gold rose hastily to his feet. He paused a moment, and as he did so Valentine Chantry looked up at him with a sweet smile. "Au revoir," she said.

Gold and his wife went down the beach.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Pamela said critically, "I don't think, you know, that that was wise. To snatch your husband away from another woman is always bad policy. It makes you seem possessive. And husbands hate that."

"Seems very sensible to me," said the General. "Seems a nice, sensible little woman altogether."

"You've hit it exactly, General," said Sarah. "But there's a

limit to the sensibleness of sensible women. I have a feeling she won't be so sensible when it's a case of Valentine Chantry."

She turned her head and whispered, "Look at him now. Just like thunder. That man looks as if he's got the most frightful temper. . ."

Commander Chantry was scowling after the retreating husband and wife in a singularly unpleasant fashion.

M. Hercule Poirot was disappointed with Rhodes. He had come for a rest and a holiday—a holiday, especially, from crime.

"It is that I am crime-minded," he told himself reproachfully. "I have the indigestion! I imagine things."

But still he worried.

One morning he came down to find Mrs. Gold sitting on the terrace doing needlework.

As he came up to her he had the impression that there was the flicker of a cambric handkerchief swiftly whisked out of sight. Mrs. Gold's eyes were dry, but they were suspiciously bright. Her manner, too, struck him as being a shade too cheerful.

She said, "Good morning, M. Poirot," with an enthusiasm that seemed a shade overdone.

"Good morning, madame. Another beautiful day."

"Yes, isn't it fortunate? But Douglas and I are always lucky in our weather."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. We're really very lucky altogether. You know, M. Poirot, when one sees so much trouble and unhappiness, and so many couples divorcing each other and all that sort of thing, well, one does feel very grateful for one's own happiness."

"It is pleasant to hear you say so, madame."

"Yes. Douglas and I are so wonderfully happy together. We've been married five years, you know, and five years is a long time nowadays—"

"I have no doubt that in some cases it can seem an eternity, madame," said Poirot dryly.

"—but I really believe that we're happier now than when we were first married. You see, we're so absolutely suited to each other."

"That, of course, is everything."

"That's why I feel so sorry for people who aren't happy. Mrs. Chantry, for instance—"

"Mrs. Chantry?"

"I don't think she's at all a nice woman."

"No. No, perhaps not."

"In fact, I'm quite sure she's *not* a nice woman. But in a

way one feels sorry for her. Because in spite of her money and her good looks and all that"—Mrs. Gold's fingers were trembling and she was quite unable to thread her needle—"—she's not the sort of woman men really stick to. She's the sort of woman that men would get tired of very easily. Don't you think so?"

"I myself should certainly get tired of her conversation before any great space of time had passed," said Poirot cautiously.

"Yes, that's what I mean. She has, of course, a kind of appeal..." Mrs. Gold hesitated, her lips trembled, she stabbed uncertainly at her work.

Hercule Poirot thought it well to change the subject. "You do not bathe this morning?" he said. "And Monsieur your husband, is he down on the beach?"

Mrs. Gold looked up, blinked, resumed her almost defiantly bright manner and replied: "No, not this morning. We arranged to go round the walls of the old city. But somehow or other we—we missed each other. They started without me."

Douglas Gold came out on to the terrace looking pleased with himself, but at the same time slightly guilty. He said: "Hullo, M. Poirot," and added rather self-consciously, "Been showing Mrs. Chantry the Crusaders' walls. Marjorie didn't feel up to going."

Poirot's eyebrows rose slightly, but at that moment Valentine Chantry came sweeping out, crying in her high voice:

"Douglas—a pink gin—positively I must have a pink gin."

Douglas Gold went off to order the drink, and Valentine sank into a chair by Poirot. She was looking radiant this morning.

She saw her husband and Pamela coming up from the beach towards them and waved a hand.

"Have a nice bathe, darling? Isn't it a divine morning?"

Commander Chantry did not answer. He swung up the steps, passed her without a word or a look, and vanished into the bar.

Valentine Chantry's perfect but foolish mouth fell open.

Pamela Lyall's face expressed keen enjoyment of the situation. Masking it as far as possible, she sat down by Valentine Chantry and Poirot strolled gently towards the bar.

He found young Gold waiting for the pink gin with a flushed face. He looked disturbed and angry.

"That man's a brute!" he said to Poirot, and he nodded his head in the direction of the retreating figure of Chantry.

"It is possible," said Poirot. "Yes, it is quite possible. But *les femmes*, they like brutes, remember that."

"I shouldn't be surprised if he ill-treats her!" Douglas muttered.

"She probably likes that, too."

Douglas Gold looked at him, puzzled, then he took up the pink gin and carried it outside.

Hercule Poirot sat on a stool and ordered a *sirop de cassis*. While he was sipping it, Chantry came back and drank several pink gins in rapid succession. "If Valentine thinks she can get rid of me like she's got rid of a lot of other damned fools," he said suddenly, "she's mistaken! I've got her and I mean to keep her. No other fellow's going to get her except over my dead body."

He flung down some money, turned on his heel, and went out.

It was three days later when Hercule Poirot drove out to the Mount of the Prophet. It was cool and agreeable, the road winding higher and higher through the golden-green fir trees. Outside the restaurant Poirot got out of the car and wandered into the woods, coming out at last in a clearing that seemed truly on top of the world. Far below, deeply and dazzlingly blue, was the sea.

Here at last was peace. He was removed from care and human problems. He was above the world. Carefully placing his folded overcoat on a tree stump, Hercule Poirot sat down.

Then he looked up with a start. A little woman in a brown coat and skirt was hurrying towards him. It was Marjorie Gold, and this time she had abandoned all pretence. Her face was wet with tears. Poirot could not escape. She was upon him.

"M. Poirot, you've got to help me! I'm so miserable I don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do!"

She looked up at him with a distracted face. Her fingers fastened on his coat sleeve. Then, alarmed by something she saw in his face, she drew back a little. "What—what is it?"

"You want my advice, madame? It is that you ask?"

"Yes," she stammered. "Yes . . ."

"*Eh bien*—here it is." He spoke curtly, trenchantly. "Leave this place at once—*before it is too late*."

"What?" She stared at him, astonished.

"You heard me. Leave this island."

"But—"

"That is what I say."

"But why—why?"

"It is my advice to you—if you value your life."

She gasped. "What do you mean? You're frightening me."

"Yes," said Poirot gravely. "That is my intention."

She sank down, her face in her hands.

"But I can't! He wouldn't come! Douglas wouldn't, I mean. She wouldn't let him. He's crazy about her, and he believes

everything she tells him—that her husband ill-treats her, that she's an injured innocent, that nobody has ever understood her . . . I don't mean anything to him any more. He wants me to give him his freedom, to divorce him. He believes she'll divorce her husband and marry him, but I'm afraid. Chantry will never give her up. Last night she showed Douglas bruises on her arm and it made Douglas wild. He's so chivalrous . . . I'm frightened! What's going to happen? Tell me what to do!"

Hercule Poirot stood looking straight across the water to the blue line of hills on the mainland of Asia.

"I have told you," he said. "Leave the island *before it is too late*."

She shook her head. "I can't—I can't—unless Douglas . . ."
Poirot sighed, then he shrugged.

The sequence of events on the night of October the twenty-ninth was perfectly clear.

First of all, before dinner, there was a quarrel between Gold and Chantry. Chantry's voice rose louder and louder, and his last words were overheard by four persons—the cashier at the desk, the manager, General Barnes, and Pamela Lyall.

"You damned swine! If you and my wife think you can do this to me, you're mistaken! As long as I'm alive, Valentine will remain my wife."

Then he had flung himself out of the hotel, his face contorted with rage.

After dinner a surprising reconciliation took place. Valentine asked Marjorie Gold to come for a moonlight drive and Pamela and Sarah went with them. Gold and Chantry played pocket billiards together, and later on they joined Hercule Poirot and General Barnes in the lounge. For almost the first time Chantry's face was smiling and good-tempered.

"Have a good game?" asked the General.

"This fellow's too good for me!" the commander said.
"Ran out with a break of twenty-six."

"Pure fluke," said Gold. "What'll you have? I'll go and get hold of a waiter."

"Pink gin for me, thanks."

"General?"

"Thanks. I'll have a whisky and soda."

"Same for me. And you, M. Poirot?"

"You are most kind. I should like a *sirop de cassis*."

Douglas Gold laughed. "Sounds a funny taste to me," he said amiably. "I'll go and order them."

Shortly afterwards the General related an anecdote of his military career in India in the year 1915. The two Englishmen

listened politely, and Hercule Poirot sipped his *sirop de cassis*. Just as the General finished the women appeared at the doorway of the lounge. All four seemed in the best of spirits and were talking and laughing.

"Tony darling, it was too divine," cried Valentine as she dropped into a chair by his side. "The most marvellous idea of Mrs. Gold's. You ought all to have come!"

"What about a drink?" her husband said. He looked inquiringly at the others.

"Pink gin for me, darling," said Valentine.

"Gin and ginger beer," said Pamela.

"Sidecar," said Sarah.

"Right." Chantry stood up. He pushed his own untouched pink gin over to his wife. "You have this. I'll order another for myself. What's yours, Mrs. Gold?"

Mrs. Gold was being helped out of her coat by her husband. She turned, smiling. "Can I have an orangeade, please?"

Chantry went towards the door and Mrs. Gold smiled up in her husband's face.

"It was so lovely, Douglas, I wish you had come."

"I wish I had, too. We'll go another night, shall we?"

They smiled at each other.

Valentine Chantry picked up the pink gin and drained it.

"Oh!" she sighed, "I needed that."

Douglas Gold took Marjorie's coat and laid it on a settee. As he strolled back to the others he said sharply, "Hullo, what's the matter?"

Valentine Chantry was leaning back in her chair. Her lips were blue and her hand was pressed against her heart.

"I feel—queer . . ." she whispered, then she gasped, fighting for breath.

Chantry came back into the room. He quickened his step.

"Val, what's the matter?"

"I—I don't know . . . That drink. It tasted queer . . ."

"The pink gin?"

Chantry swung round, his face working. He caught Douglas Gold by the shoulder.

"That was *my* drink . . . Gold, what the hell did you put in it?"

Douglas Gold was staring at the convulsed face of the woman in the chair. He had gone dead white. "I—I—nothing—"

Valentine Chantry slipped down in her chair.

General Barnes cried out, "Get a doctor—quick . . ."

Five minutes later Valentine Chantry died.

There was no bathing next morning.

Pamela Lyall, white-faced, clad in a simple dark dress, clutched at Hercule Poirot in the hall and drew him into the writing room. "It's horrible!" she said. "Horrible! You foresaw it, I know." He bent his head gravely.

She stamped her foot on the floor. "You should have stopped it! Somehow! It *could* have been stopped!"

"How?" asked Hercule Poirot.

She paused, at a loss.

"Couldn't you have gone to someone—to the police—?"

"And say what? What is there to say—*before the event*? That someone has murder in their heart? I tell you, *mon enfant*, if one human being is determined to kill another human being—"

"You could have warned the victim," insisted Pamela.

"Sometimes," said Hercule Poirot, "warnings are useless."

Pamela said slowly, "You could have warned the murderer—show him that you knew what was intended . . ."

Poirot nodded appreciatively.

"Yes—a better plan, that. But even then you have to reckon with a criminal's chief vice."

"What is that?"

"Conceit. A criminal never believes that his crime can fail."

"But it was absurd," cried Pamela. "The whole crime was childish! Why, the police arrested Douglas Gold at once."

"Yes." He added thoughtfully, "Douglas Gold is a very stupid young man."

"Incredibly stupid! I hear that they found the rest of the poison—whatever it was—?"

"A form of stropanthin. A heart poison."

"They found the rest of it in his dinner jacket pocket?"

"Quite true."

"Incredibly stupid!" said Pamela again. "Perhaps he meant to get rid of it—and the shock of the wrong person being poisoned paralysed him. What a scene it would make on the stage. The lover putting the stropanthin in the husband's glass and then, just when his attention is elsewhere, the wife drinks it instead. Think of the ghastly moment when Douglas Gold turned round and realized he had killed the woman he loved . . ."

She shivered. "Your triangle. *The Eternal Triangle!* Who would have thought it would end like this?"

"I did think," said Poirot slowly, "of trying to persuade Valentine Chantry to leave the island, but she would never have believed what I had to tell her. *Pauvre femme*, her stupidity killed her."

"I don't believe it would have helped if she *had* left the island," said Pamela. "He would simply have followed her."

"He?"

"Douglas Gold."

"You think Douglas Gold would have followed her? Oh, no, mademoiselle, you are wrong. You are completely wrong. You have not yet appreciated the truth of this matter. If Valentine Chantry had left the island, her husband would have gone with her."

Pamela looked puzzled.

"Well, naturally."

"And then, you see, the crime would simply have taken place somewhere else."

"I don't understand."

"I am saying to you that the same crime would have occurred somewhere else—that crime being *the murder of Valentine Chantry by her husband*."

Pamela stared.

"Are you saying that it was Commander Chantry who murdered Valentine?"

"Yes. You saw him do it! Douglas Gold brought him his drink and he sat with it in front of him. When the women came in we all looked across the room: he had the stropanthin ready, he dropped it into the pink gin and presently, courteously, he passed it along to his wife and she drank it."

"But the packet of stropanthin was found in Douglas Gold's pocket."

"A very simple matter to slip it there when we were all crowding round the dying woman."

It was two minutes before Pamela recovered her breath.

"But I don't understand a word! The triangle—you said yourself—"

Hercule Poirot nodded his head vigorously.

"I said there was a triangle—yes. But you, you imagined *the wrong one*. You were deceived by some very clever acting. You thought, as you were meant to think, that both Tony Chantry and Douglas Gold were in love with Valentine Chantry. You believed, as you were meant to believe, that Douglas Gold, being in love with Valentine Chantry (whose husband refused to divorce her) took the desperate step of administering a powerful poison to Chantry and that, by a fatal mistake, Valentine Chantry drank that poison instead. All that is illusion. Chantry has been meaning to do away with his wife for some time. He was bored to death with her—I could see that from the first. He married her for her money and now he wants to marry another woman. So he planned to get rid of Valentine and keep her money. That entailed murder."

"Another woman?"

Poirot said slowly: "Yes, yes—the little *Marjorie Gold*. It was the eternal triangle, all right! But you saw it the wrong way round. Neither of those two men cared in the least for Valentine Chantry.

"It was her vanity and *Marjorie Gold's* very clever stage managing that made you think they did! A very clever woman, Mrs. Gold, and amazingly attractive in her demure Madonna, poor-little-thing way. I have known four women criminals of the very same type. Tell me this, please: what *evidence* did you ever have that Douglas Gold was in love with Valentine Chantry? When you come to think it out, you will see that there was only Mrs. Gold's confidences and Chantry's jealous bluster. Yes? You see?"

"It's horrible," cried Pamela.

"They were a clever pair," said Poirot with professional detachment. "They planned to 'meet' here and stage their crime. That Marjorie Gold, she is a cold-blooded devil! She would have sent her poor, innocent fool of a husband to the scaffold without the least remorse."

Pamela cried out: "But he was arrested and taken away last night."

"Ah," said Hercule Poirot, "but after that, I had a few little words with the police. It is true that I did not see Chantry put the stropanthin in the glass. I, like everyone else, looked up when the ladies came in. But the moment I realized that Valentine Chantry had been poisoned, I watched her husband without taking my eyes off him. And so, you see, I actually saw him slip the packet of stropanthin in Douglas Gold's coat pocket."

He added grimly, "I am a good witness. My name is well-known. The moment the police heard my story they realized that it put an entirely different complexion on the matter."

"And then?" demanded Pamela.

"*Eh bien*, then they asked Commander Chantry a few questions. He tried to bluster it out, but he is not really clever. He soon broke down."

"So Douglas Gold was set free?"

"Yes."

"And—Marjorie Gold?"

Poirot's face grew stern.

"I warned her," he said. "Yes, I warned her . . . up on the Mount of the Prophet . . . It was the only chance of averting the crime. I as good as told her that I suspected her. She understood. But she believed herself too clever. I told her to leave the island if she valued her life. She chose—to remain."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER!

FAR, far away in the city of Malcazar there lived a handsome young sherbet-seller who had won the heart of the Sultan's daughter. Every day Abdul would ply his trade beside the Palace gate, and every night the beautiful princess would trip softly to the wall to open the secret seraglio door. But one moonlit midnight when sleep would not come the Sultan walked in the garden, down through the citron grove and found the lovers underneath the gingko tree.

Bound, beaten and bastinadoed, the luckless Abdul was condemned to die. The beautiful princess cried and protested in vain, but on the eve of execution she pleaded one last time.

"He is too young to die," she said. "He is handsome, endowed with strength and courage, and wit."

"Wit . . . ?" said the Sultan, who liked wit best of all.

Early next morning the Sultan called for his palanquin and set forth to the gaol, the weeping princess beside him. Calling for the Executioner, he quickly made all ready, and entered the cell with Abdul's gaolers.

"As you will have seen," the Sultan said to Abdul, "this cell has two doors. Behind one of the doors we have placed the princess my daughter. Behind the other the Executioner awaits you . . .

"Now one of your two gaolers," the Sultan said, "is a rascal who cannot tell the truth. The other is a good, just man who cannot tell a lie. Ask one of them a question. One question only, of either of your gaolers . . . And if the answer you receive leads you to the door behind which waits the princess my daughter, your wit shall have saved your life."



And now, over to the reader ! Can you supply the question that will save poor Abdul ? That will enable him to choose the right door ? The best solution received by August 29 will win Five Guineas ! Send your entry on a postcard to

**Suspense (Comp.),
3, Pilgrim Street,
London E.C.4**

The Editor's decision will be final—and we regret that this competition cannot be open to our overseas readers.

THE STRANGER FROM DYING BOYS' REEF

By ADRIAN CONAN DOYLE

"**C**OST yer one and a tanner. Well, if you ain't got no money ye don't drink. Wot's that! Just got in from Dyin' Boys' Reef? Hey, Joe, 'ere's a cove from Dyin' Boys'. All right, mate, the drinks on the 'ouse. One and a tanner's worth, the price of yer story."

They drew nearer then, the pearlers and the fishers of *bêche-de-mer*, but they did it very delicately, looking down into their glasses or up at the palm-leaf ceiling, anywhere except at the things they were really watching. For the Gentlemen of the sea, being professionally in contact with stingarees, firefish and such-like cattle, are the most tactful men in the world when it comes to other people's mutilations and, for the same reasons, it was kind of comforting to know that a glass of whisky needs only the palm, not the fingers, for its proper manipulation. You'd deny



★ *Son of the famous Sir Arthur, Adrian Conan Doyle first started his travels round the world when he was nine years old. Before his marriage was well-known as a racing motorist. Made safari through the Cameroons with his wife and brought back a *Trichobatrachus robustus*—the first living specimen of a hairy frog in captivity. Naval service during the war. Since then has tried to revive mediaeval swordsmanship and jousting. This, alas, was a doomed effort in a cynical world.*

it? Then you weren't there that sweating afternoon when the stranger told his tale in Tasman Joe's Bar.

It's a queer name, Dying Boys', he said, but it's got a meaning, as some of you may know. Seems that one night a long time ago a latakai full of Kanakas, a hundred of 'em, was bearing south from the Nugurias when they ripped her bottom out on a reef. There was an atoll with palms on it, so they had a run for their money among the coconuts, and then, when they'd finished off the nuts, maybe they fed themselves for a while off the reef creatures. But you can't drink sea-urchins, so ninety of 'em died of thirst and, save for one survivor who got picked up by turtle hunters, the rest went the harder way. Belly cramps by overstuffing themselves on their pals.

When an atoll the size of a back garden has sent ninety-nine men to their death, it's got some right to a fancy name, and even then it wasn't satisfied. There have been others since, not many; just one or two blokes who went south from the Nugurias and never came back.

It was all the fault of Henri Matin, the pearler from New Caledonia, that I lost my ketch the *Alice*, but he paid with his life for it. He never could keep his hand from a bottle, could Henri, so it's likely enough he was stinking when he tore out her keel on the niggerheads fringing Dying Boys' Reef.

It was just dawn when he did it and all I felt down in the cabin was a kind of shudder, like an animal gives when it is hard hit, and then a pale green light where the bilges used to be. As I came through the hatchway, over she went on her beams, tossing us both into the sea and there I was swimming for my life with all my worldly possessions; that's to say, the pyjama trousers I was wearing. The coral wasn't a hundred yards distant and, as there was no swell running, both of us should have made it if there hadn't been somebody else looking for breakfast. No, I don't

think it was a shark, for between yells Henri kept on swimming even though he was leaving a trail like port wine across the blue water. I swam very well that morning. If you want to break a world's record just arrange to have something nibbling a ship-mate a few yards in your rear.

Anyway, when I scrambled up the reef, Henri was gone, and as I watched the last of my ketch take the plunge, thanks to that drunken sot, I could have pumped that barracuda by the fin for squaring the debt of the *Alice*. But what the heck was I to do? There I was stranded on that ill-omened reef, way off the trade routes, with nothing but a pair of old pyjama trousers to give me a fresh start in life, even if I was rescued by a miracle before the crabs picked over my bones. The first thing to do was to get to the atoll, so I swam the inner lagoon, and tottering up a beach of blazing white sand to where the palm trees offered a bit of shade, sat myself down with my head between my hands to think things over.

God, the silence of that place! There was the murmur of the sea, of course, and overhead that dry whispering from the palm fronds, but these weren't noises, not honest life noises. They were just—well, bits of the same silence, the coloured bits, that's all.

It was lucky for me that the sun was still low in the east, for if I hadn't seen his shadow first, I might have died from shock.

"Not the oysters," a grave voice said. "Coconuts, yes, but really you mustn't meddle with the oysters."

I sprang round.

Now I'm not hot on Holy Writ but I reckon that Jehovah's fighting prophets must have been cut from just about the same timber as the man who was standing behind me. He was old and shaggy white, all hair and beard flowing in a tangled mass over his shoulders and chest. But it was his height that shook me most. I have never seen a man so tall, outside a freak circus; seven foot if he was an inch, and I've never seen a man so thin. He was wearing some kind of loose garment that left bare his neck, his arms and his legs, which is one way of describing a lot of brown bones sticking out of a tattered nightshirt. But his hands, I noticed even then, were simply enormous, and clawed like a talon of an eagle.

"Who the hell are you?" I screeched, scrambling to my feet.

"Your brother," said he, and his eyes—which looked completely white, so sunburnt was his skin—smiled down at me mild as a child's.

"I didn't know this island was inhabited," I remarked, feeling a bit more perky.

"Oh, yes," said he, "there are lots of God's children living here."

"A new colony, eh? Seems a queer place for folks to settle. What do you do for food and water?"

"The Lord provides."

"Where are the other folks?" I asked. Jiminy, if there were settlers in this God-forsaken place then there might be a schooner here every few months which could take me out of it. Things were looking up.

"You'll find some of our brothers there," he said, pointing his staff at the reef.

Shading my eyes, I stared at the long ridge of dead black coral fringing the far side of the lagoon. "I don't see anybody," I remarked at last.

He smiled at me, like the skeleton of somebody's kind old grandfather.

"You will," said he. "There are many brothers here whom you must learn to know and love in the short time you'll be with us." He broke off, and seizing me by the arm—what a grip he had!—he pointed overhead. "Look there," he cried. "That's one of God's folk who's been here quite a while."

Now has it ever occurred to you, chums, that it's the little things that really scare one in life? A man will go to almost certain death with a grin on his face, but a harmless snake in his bed or an angry woman, or a customs official poking about in the lockers after a long pearling—oh, no!

So I looked up where he was pointing and my knees started to go shaky, even though there wasn't anything there to scare me, really. Just a whopping big coconut crab creeping down the bole of a palm tree. You know what ugly blighters they are, the size of a football, all pink and red and blue with stiff black bristles and a pair of nippers that could cut through a man's wrist. Well, there he was, creeping slowly down, with the old man pointing at him and smiling in his beard as you or I might point and smile at a favourite son.

"Yes, he and his have been here quite a while," he said, gentlelike, "and one soon gets to know them. Behold that black mark across his back. Surely this is the brother that ate the feet—stay, was it him?" He pressed his hand to his forehead. "No, no, I am in error again. It was the Giant Clam, of course."

"Look here, mister—"

"Come," he said, resting his hand upon my shoulder, "you must be weary and in hunger. Is it not imposed upon us to succour and clothe the naked and the starving? Let it never be

said that the commands of the Lord of Hosts were disobeyed by the humble Guardian of Dying Boys' Reef."

This sounded a bit healthier, so off we set along the sand and just round the point of the atoll I had my second shock. There was a little half-moon basin that might once have been a sea cove before it dried up, ending in a wall nearly ten feet high which was really a part of the island's crust. Between this and the cove was a neat little lean-to shanty built of coral slabs, roofed over with doors from old ships. Even had a chimney, it did, made out of a bucket with the bottom knocked out.

Inside, everything was clean as a monk's cell, the walls whitened all over with lime scraped from dead sea shells, and best of all was the reeking great pot full of sweet potatoes.

"You've made yourself so snug," I said, between munches, "it almost looks as though you've come to stay. Been here long?"

"Longer than you've been in this world," he said.

I stared at him with half a potato stuck in my mouth. Then I swallowed.

"Just how did you come here, mister?" I asked quietly.

"In the brig *Valentine*," said he. "I was the mate."

I knew all about the brig *Valentine*. Fifty-two years ago she left the Solomons for the Philippines, and was never heard of again.

"That's half a century," I whispered. "Weren't there any other survivors?"

"Half a century," he echoed, "and there were no other survivors." And then he just sat there nodding and smiling at me and stroking his tangled white beard.

I slept bad that night. It was comfortable enough, a kind of wooden crib full of palm fronds, but I was scared, like a kid's scared, and it made it no better that I didn't know the reason why.

There was one thing struck me from the first. Men who've lived entirely alone have got one characteristic in common—they gush like a spout whenever they come in contact with someone else. Now this old man had been living on this atoll for more than fifty years, yet he never spoke a word, not a word, mark you, unless I spoke first. You'd have thought that desert island was so full of folk that he had all the jabbering a man could do with. And yet I tell you again, I never did see a place where the stillness was quite so still. The only time he'd spoken off his own bat was that remark of his when he came on me under the palm tree, so I asked him next day what he'd meant.

"I know the ways of men," he replied. "As soon as you

felt the pangs of hunger you'd have gone out there on the reef murdering and butchering." He was smiling as gentle as ever but deep under his brows I caught the red smoulder of his eyes. "If you've got to eat, there's coconuts and sweet potatoes, but you leave them oysters alone."

"Why?"

"Because there's God in 'em, that's why," said he. "The Almighty breathed His Spirit even into the lowliest of His creations, and if I find you meddling with the oysters or any other of the Brothers, I'll feed you bit by bit to the moray eels."

"Here, steady on," I grinned, trying to turn things into a joke. "Man comes first, doesn't he?"

"First!" Snatching down an old brass-bound book from a shelf, he opened it at a marker before thrusting it under my nose. "He comes *last*. Last! Don't it say in that there Bible that Man's the only fallen creature? Do you know what that means?" His voice began to quaver. "We're doomed, shipmate, doomed."

"Not if Christ knows it," I cried. "He'd got a word to say—hullo, where's the rest of it?"

"Burnt," he said very quiet, replacing the volume on the shelf. "Torn out and burnt fifty years ago under my stew-pot. The Lord of Hosts wouldn't hold with that New Testament stuff. But come, I am past the usual hour, it is time we were on the reef."

"That's so," I said, scrambling to my feet, as, taking up his staff, he turned to the door. "There may be a bit o' flotsam from the *Alice*."

The tide was out and under the setting sun the whole line of Dying Boys' Reef stood up in one long jagged black crest like the wattles of a sea-serpent in a lake of fire.

"Hurry, hurry," he mumbled, fair dragging me after him to where the coral joined the shore. "It's supper time, and the Guardian ain't never been late before. Flotsam, eh? This night I'll show you such a piece of flotsam as the eyes o' man never saw since the Angel of Wrath struck him off the ship's roll."

I'm no slouch, yet once on the reef I hadn't a chance to keep up with that gaunt iron skeleton bounding through the pools, or leaping sure-footed as a goat from one slowly draining nigger-head to the next. There was a spur of coral sticking up on the deep-water side and no sooner had he reached it than down he flopped on his knees, his face so close to the sea that the tip of his beard spread out like a small white fan. I didn't lose no time getting a look over his shoulder, I can tell you.

About five feet below the surface, that would be about twenty feet at high tide, was a broad ledge ending in a precipice, plunging sheer down into a nothingness of indigo blue with one little fish hanging in it like a black crucifix ; at least, it seemed a little fish until my head began to swim, and I realized suddenly that what I was looking at was a full-grown hammerhead shark a hundred fathoms deep. But then, when I took another peek at the ledge, I forgot all about abysses and dizziness.

Oysters! Now, as you boys know, the big pearlers seldom live above the ten fathom line, but whether through some local condition of feeding or breeding, the fact remains that little more than an arm's reach down, the whole shelf as far as the eye could follow it was one solid mass of oysters. Millions of 'em, the real dinner-plate pearl bearers, each with its shell half-open against the turn of the tide, clustering so thick one on another that the mother-of-pearl shimmering through their mantles seemed to suffuse the water with a radiance like moonlight.

And right in the middle of them, just below where we were hanging over the coral, was something that made me rub my eyes. It had a blood-red fringe waving around the edge of its shell, yet it wasn't a Giant Clam. It was an oyster and it was the size of a large cushion. "Good God!" I gasped.

Producing from his robe a coconut husk filled with some filthy stuff resembling chopped rockworm, the old man struck the water lightly, twice, with his staff and on the instant, as if in answer to some understood signal, the monstrous object began to gape until the rim of its upper shell was scarcely a yard below the surface. Then, very gently, he pushed aside the waving mantle with his pole, so that I could see into the depth of that marvellous cavern. Far back, on a mass of dark mucilage, lay an object that looked like an luminous violet egg.

"The pearl of Dying Boys' Reef," he said quietly.

I didn't speak. You don't when you are looking at a hundred thousand quid through five feet of water.

He tipped out the husk, and as the cloud of worm fragments drifted downwards, the mantle began to quiver, drawing them in as though by suction. Then, slowly, the two halves of the great shell came together until there was nothing to see but a flat round rock with a scarlet lip hanging out of it.

"He likes his supper raw and bloody," breathed a voice in my ear, "and for half a century I've seen he has it."

"I thought it was against the rules to kill for food?"

"Ah, but there's some as has privileges," he muttered. I didn't catch the rest of it but it was something about those who sit on the Right Hand and those on the Left.

When we got back to the shack, night had fallen. I didn't feel like going in, so I sat myself down on the sand with my back against the doorpost while I tried to get things straight in my mind. Why had the Guardian—yes, that's what he'd called himself—shown me his treasure? There lay the question that kept hammering at me again and again, and the more I thought about it and failed to find an answer the less I liked it.

The old man had fed and sheltered me and yet at that moment, for no reasonable cause, if the choice of a companion on that lonely atoll had lain with me I'd have gladly exchanged the vilest wharf-rat on Thursday Island against the mate of the vanished brig *Valentine*.

I was just beginning to wonder if the real trouble didn't lie in my own nerves, when there came from out of the darkness over the sea a sound like the report of a muffled gun. As I leapt up with some crazy idea that it might be a patrol vessel, it came again, and at the same time, far off beyond the invisible reef, a patch of livid green fire spread and glowed and dwindled once more into blackness.

"Rest easy, shipmate," chuckled a voice, "that ain't what you're thinking." My companion was standing immediately behind me.

"What was it?" I managed.

"A jumping devil-ray kicking up sea fire."

"Another Brother?"

He stuck his face nearly into mine. "A creature of the outer darkness," he hissed. "Ain't you got it straight yet that the chosen folk are all on this here island?"

"Then I'm safe." I put on a grin to see what he'd do.

"Supper's ready," was all he said.

We ate in silence by the light of a dried sea-grass wick soaked in palm oil, and what with the cutty pipe full of the same stuff he lit after the meal was over, there was enough smoke in the place to dry a string of herrings.

"Did you know a man named Skaggersdorf?" he asked suddenly.

"Skaggersdorf the Finn?" I replied. "Yes, I knew him when he was working *bêche-de-mer*. Disappeared, he did, some years ago in a storm."

"He was here."

I stared at him for a moment. This was news indeed.

"Well, I'm blessed," I said. "Did he stay long?"

"He's still here."

"Here!"

He rose and opened an old ship's locker against the wall.

"That's him," he said, plunking something on the table. "If you knew him, you should know them teeth."

I did. I had seen that pair of silver fangs too often not to recognize them now, even if they did look twice the size in the gumless grin of a skull. I cleared my throat.

"How did he die?"

"Let me see now," he muttered, pulling at his beard. "Some years back it was . . . yes, that's it . . . crabs. It was the coconut crabs that had him."

"Steady, friend. A man can run from crabs."

"Ho, no, he can't," he sniggered. One huge taloned hand came sliding across the table as though to trim the wick now smoking worse than ever. "Not when he's pegged out proper, shipshape and Bristol fashion."

I was just too late. Even as I sprang for the door, his grip was on my neck. He was old enough to be my grandpappy, but I had no more chance than if I'd been a doll.

"Ye're berthed, shipmate," he screamed. "Anchor's down and all swingin' snug." And he stretched me senseless with one frightful blow.

When I came to again, I was fixed to the wall by a six-foot chain clamped round my wrist. So I lay where I'd fallen, sick as a dog but watching close.

The light being still murky, at first I could only make out the old man crooning to himself over the table, and then after a moment it got clearer and I could see what he was doing. He was sharpening a thing that looked like a butcher's cleaver.

There comes a time, perhaps once only, when a man knows by instinct that his life depends on his wits, but I must have been still a bit muzzy for all I could think about was the amazing size, when seen in the raw, as it were, of Skaggersdorf's silver teeth; that and some other matter which wouldn't come into focus until I got beyond him to the coconut crabs. Then I had it. Feet! If those crawling horrors had eaten the Finn, then whose feet. . . ?

Only little boats strayed off the trade routes, so how many other wretches, necessarily sole survivors, had that evil reef fed into a maniac's slaughter house? Me, Skaggersdorf, the nameless man . . . It was the silence or perhaps my nerve broke . . . "Who was he?" I yelled suddenly. "Whose feet went to the clam?"

The sharpening stopped while he peered at me across the lamp.

"Foot, not feet," he said at last, "the other was wooden. Jabez Miller, missionary."

"You bloody murderer!"

For an instant he made to come at me; instead, down he went on his knees with his fists, one of them grasping the cleaver, flung up to the ceiling. "I forgives him!" he cried. "Stop your ears, Jehovah! I forgives him, seeing You've delivered him here for Your purposes." Then dragging me to the table, he seized my right hand, forcing it down until the fingers were outspread flat. "He's growing, growing fast," he said, "but of late there's been too much rockworm. Five on each, one each day minced up fine. Remember a brat's game, shipmate, called Ten Little Nigger Boys?" The wick flared as the cleaver flashed down. "Well, *now* there's nine."

And there was. It didn't hurt much, yet I fainted all the same.

I'll spare you the details. It's enough that next evening he lugged me out to that cursed reef, like a dog on the end of its leash, and there we both squatted, watching the bits of raw meat, luminous red against the blue, sinking down into the maw of that monstrous oyster. It was queer to think that only a few hours before those minced fragments had been a part of me.

That night he took off my right thumb.

Fight? Like hell I did, but the mug who asked me that never knew the grip of a madman. It was like fighting with a man-eating tree.

There they are, count 'em for yourselves. Seven stumps. Just one week, dated like a calendar on a pair of sponges that were once an able-bodied seaman's paws. And the thing that got into me most wasn't the pain, mates, but eating off a table top stained like a butcher's knacking yard with my own blood.

Day by day I grew weaker and day by day, with the first flush of dawn, out we'd go linked together by that rusty chain, the mad and the dying, to stroll for our daily bread. He'd made a little boat from a driftwood log, with a rag of canvas for a sail, and though the palm crabs and every filthy thing clinging to the reef might be the Lord's Chosen, the hand of the Guardian was heavy on the fish.

By the seventh evening, I was so groggy on my pins that the tide was already over the turn when we gained the point above the oyster ledge. Curiosity is the one fixed bearing in human nature, for hacked about as I was, at that moment nothing else seemed to matter except to see once more the feeding of that obscene marvellous thing. I must have been pretty far gone, for as I crouched there staring down through the eddies of the rising tide, I found myself wondering what on earth my Aunt Mary's rusty coal scuttle could be doing sitting down there among the

oysters. Then even as the old man tapped the water with his staff, the lid began to lift, and there again was that wonderful glimmer like a patch of moonlight drowned in the sea. The Guardian fell on his knees.

"Hungry, are ye?" he gabbled, emptying the contents of the coconut husk into the water. "Want your bite o' sup, eh? Well, suck 'em in, my beauty, suck 'em in, for is it not writ that the Lord will provide?"

It was already at it, and watching those crumbs of flesh—crumbs that only that morning had been encircled by my wedding ring—drifting down into the creature's maw, such a deathly sickness came upon me that it was only by clutching at a coral knob that I saved myself from falling headlong. But even as my mutilated stumps closed upon it, I knew that fate had played her last card. The knob was an empty conch shell, the size of a melon, and without even pausing to take aim, I flung it with every remaining ounce of my strength at the Guardian's head. As luck would have it, it caught him above the ear; came a spurt of spray and there he was in the sea.

When he broke surface, the blood was running down his neck, and his eyes, fixed on mine, blazed like coals. We were still linked by the chain, and as I'd lost my only weapon, the conch shell, he had me at his mercy once he'd regained the reef.

"All right, shipmate," he said, quiet like, "we'll see who'll pay for that." And then even as he spoke, the red light in his eyes became fixed and still, like the glare in a dead animal's.

"Let go!" he howled suddenly. "Let go, ye varmint!"

Crawling to the edge, I peered down. He must have kicked out in his fall, natural enough, I suppose, and there are some things, also natural enough, that don't like being kicked between their gaping jaws. The two halves of the great oyster had come together, gripping his right foot as in the iron grip of a vice.

"Help me," he screamed. "You wouldn't let a rat die this way. Help me, brother. The tide's risin' and I can't rise with it, mate, I can't rise with it!"

And all the time, across the slow wash of the sea, his hands were reaching out to me like eagle's talons, a-quivering with murder and fury and terror.

Twice he dived down and I could see him tugging frenziedly at the lips of that awful shell, and twice he came up. And in the silence of the reef, all gold and blue and wonderful, it seemed to me strange that where there weren't no dogs, a dog should be barking. For how was I to know it was myself that was laughing, lying there on the coral with the chain stretched taut between us, and laughing fit to bust at the finest joke a man ever did see.

Inch by inch swelled the tide and though his hooks came nearer and nearer to the reef, he couldn't stretch any farther because of the grip of the thing down there on the submarine ledge, nor pull me in, for all his tugging on the chain, because of my own grip around the coral.

I stopped laughing to watch the water close around his nostrils, and then it was that with his white hair and beard floating around him like a patch of silver light, he began to sing. Aye, mates, to sing! Wasn't it old Solomon who wrote a song once in the Bible? I reckon it must have sounded about the same—rolling stuff with the heave of the sea chanty and God glaring out at you in every line—until suddenlike the voice was no longer there and only bubbles breaking on the surface.

I gave him ten minutes, lying there with the drift and drag of him pulling at the chain, and then I took my dive. Fortunately, it didn't take me long to get a grip on the shackle key hanging round his neck, for I'm not pretending I enjoyed it down there in the blue shadows, with his grinning lifeless eyes hidden from me one moment and at the next staring straight into mine with the sway of the tide.

I unlocked the chain and had already turned for the reef when a thought, the one great thought of my life, burst on me. If one man's foot was the wedge, another man's hand could be the scoop!

A slit about three inches wide now separated the two halves, and forcing my arm between them while the blood spurted in clouds from my lacerated flesh, I groped desperately through a cold slimy mass, like the putrescence of some rotting body, until three remaining fingers closed on something hard and oval. From the midst of filth I drew it out, and even though my breath was running short, I couldn't surface before taking a peek at it.

Violet it was and shaped like a pear, with a kind of light that made you want to lick it, kiss it, swallow it. And there I hung in the sea gloom, clinging to the dead man while I gazed down on the thing balanced on my open palm, on one of the great wonders of the world shining in the bloodstained darkness of my palm. Then up I went to the air and the sun, leaving behind me for ever that softly gleaming ledge where still, for all I know, the Guardian of Dying Boys' Reef floats anchored to his oyster.

There's not much more to tell. I loaded the little boat with every one of the Lord's Chosen that seemed edible, and hoisting the rag sail, set forth from that accursed island. I hadn't a chance of getting anywhere, I knew that, but there's a cleanliness of death at sea which calls to a man. However, I was still alive,

even if I had a black tongue like a parrot's sticking out of my mouth, when Soapy Bennett and his bêche-de-mer schooner picked me up one glassy morning three hundred miles from nowhere.

Well, Gents, that's my tale, one and a tanner's worth, and being a trifle short o' cash I'd take it kindly if you'd refill . . . What's that! Buy me own or be damned for a bum? Why, ye stony-hearted bastards! And me with the price of all New Ireland sewn into the tail of my shirt?"



MERDER STORY

PERHAPS the briefest and best of all murder mysteries was written by Archie, the little boy in E. F. Benson's novel "Across the Stream." All it lacks in the way of mastery is a number of red herrings, and any reader can put those in for himself. It reads :

"There was once a merderer with yellow eyes, and his wife said to him, 'If you merder me you will be hung.' And he was hung on Tuesday next.

"Finis"

Georgette Heyer, master of the suave swashbuckler, is best known for her historical romances which combine vivacity with encyclopaedic knowledge of her pet period. She also writes witty murder mysteries—though a reviewer once commented that a story of hers contained a “double fracture of mystery story ethics.” Among her latest novels are A Blunt Instrument, and Sylvester.

NIGHT AT THE INN

By GEORGETTE HEYER

THERE were only three persons partaking of dinner at the inn, for it was neither a posting-house, nor a hostelry much patronized by stage-coaches. The man in the moleskin waistcoat, who sat on one of the settles flanking the fireplace in the coffee-room, gave no information about himself; the young lady and gentleman on the other side were more forthcoming.

The lady had been set down at the *Pelican* after dusk by a cross-country coach. Her baggage—a bandbox and a corded trunk—was as modest as her appearance: brown curls smoothed neatly under a bonnet, a cashmere gown made high to the neck and boasting neither frills nor lace, serviceable half-boots and tan gloves, and a drab pelisse. Only two things belied the air of primness she seemed so carefully to cultivate: the jaunty bow which tied her bonnet under one ear, and the twinkle in her eye, which was as sudden as it was refreshing.

The gentleman was her senior by several years: an open-faced, pleasant young man whose habit proclaimed the man of business. He wore a decent suit of clothes, with a waistcoat that betrayed only slight sartorial ambition; his linen was well laundered, and the points of his shirt collar starched, but he had tied his neckcloth with more regard for propriety than fashion, and he displayed none of the trinkets that proclaimed the dandy. However, the watch he consulted was a handsome gold repeater,

and he wore upon one finger a signet ring, with his monogram engraved, so that it was reasonable to suppose him to be a man of some substance.

He was fresh from Lisbon, he told the landlord, as he set down his two valises in the taproom, and had landed at Portsmouth that very day. Tomorrow he was going to board a coach which would carry him within walking distance of his paternal home: a rare surprise for his parents that would be, for they had not the least expectation of seeing him! He had been out of England for three years, and it seemed like a dream to be back again.

The landlord, a burly, rubicund man with a smiling countenance, entered into the exile's excitement with indulgent good humour. Young master was no doubt on leave from the Peninsula? Not wounded, he hoped? No, oh, no! Young master had not the good fortune to be a soldier. He was employed in a counting-house, and had had no expectation of getting his transfer from Lisbon for years. But—with offhand pride—he had suddenly been informed that there was a place for him at headquarters in the City, and had jumped aboard the first packet.

The coffee-room was a low-pitched apartment with shuttered windows, one long table, and an old-fashioned hearth flanked by high-backed settles. On one of these, toasting her feet, sat the young lady; on the other, his countenance obscured by the journal he was perusing, was the man in the moleskin waistcoat. He paid no heed to the newcomer, but the lady tucked her toes under the settle and assumed an attitude of stiff propriety.

The gentleman from Lisbon moved over to the fire and stood before it, warming his hands. After a pause he observed, with a shy smile, that these November evenings were chilly.

The lady agreed, but volunteered no further remark, and the gentleman added hopefully that his name was John Cranbrook.

The lady subjected him to a speculative, if slightly surreptitious scrutiny. Apparently satisfied, she relaxed her decorous pose and said that hers was Mary Gateshead.

He seemed much gratified by this confidence, bowed politely and said, "How do you do?" This civility encouraged Miss Gateshead to invite him to sit down, which he instantly did, noticing as he did so that a pair of narrow eyes had appeared above the sheets of the journal on the opposite settle and were fixed upon him. But as soon as his own encountered them they disappeared again behind the newspaper.

Searching his mind for something with which to inaugurate a conversation, Mr. Cranbrook asked Miss Gateshead whether she, too, had found the *Swan* and the *George* full.

She replied simply: "Oh, no! I could not afford the prices they charge at the big inns! I am a governess."

"Are you?" said Mr. Cranbrook, with equal simplicity. "In the ordinary way I can't afford 'em either, but I'm very plump in the pocket just now!" He patted his breast as he spoke, and laughed. And after a few minutes, while the man in the moleskin waistcoat read his paper, and the landlord laid the covers on the table, he was telling her of his three years in Lisbon, and of the unexpected stroke of good fortune that had befallen him.

Miss Gateshead told him that she was the eldest daughter of a curate with numerous progeny, and she was bound for her first situation. A large house, not ten miles from this place, and Mrs. Stockton, her employer, had graciously promised to send the gig to the *Pelican* to fetch her in the morning.

"I should have thought she might have sent a closed carriage in this weather," said John bluntly.

"Oh, no! Not for the governess!" Miss Gateshead said, shocked.

The landlord came in, bearing the leg of mutton, which he set down on a massive sideboard. His wife, a decent-looking stout woman in a mob-cap, arranged various removes on the table, bobbed a curtsy to Miss Gateshead and asked if she would care for a glass of porter or some tea.

Miss Gateshead accepted the offer of tea, and, after a moment's hesitation, untied the strings of her bonnet and laid this demure creation down on the settle.

The man in the moleskin waistcoat folded his journal and bore it to the table, where he propped it up against a tarnished cruet and continued laboriously to peruse it. His fellow guests took their places at the other end of the board. The landlady dumped a pot of tea at Miss Gateshead's elbow, flanking it with a chipped jug of milk and a cup and saucer, and John bespoke a pint of ale.

"And what for you, sir?" asked Mrs. Fyton, addressing herself to the man at the bottom of the table.

"Mr. Waggleswick'll take his usual," said her spouse, sharpening the carving knife.

The soup, ladled from a large tureen, was nameless and savourless, but Miss Gateshead and Mr. Cranbrook, busily engaged in disclosing to one another their circumstances, family histories, tastes, dislikes and aspirations, drank it without complaint. Mr. Waggleswick even seemed to like it, for he called for a second helping. The mutton which followed the soup was underdone and tough, and the side-dish of broccoli would have been improved by straining.

"I don't think they can enjoy much custom here," said Miss Gateshead wisely, during one of the landlord's absences. "It is the most rambling old place, but no one seems to be staying here but ourselves, and you can *lose* yourself in the passages! In fact I did," she added, sawing her way through the meat on her plate. "I have not dared to look at the sheets, but I have the most old-fashioned bed, and I asked them to make up the fire again because it was smoking so dreadfully. And what is more, I haven't seen a chambermaid, and you can see there is no waiter."

When Mr. Waggleswick had finished his repast, he noisily picked his teeth for some time, but at last pushed back his chair and took himself off.

Miss Gatehead, who had been covertly observing him, whispered: "What a strange-looking man! I don't like him above half, do you?"

"He is not precisely handsome, I own!" said John, grinning. "His nose is broken, and I dare say he is a pugilist."

"How horrid! I am glad I am not alone with him here! Did you notice how he watched you?"

"Watched me? He barely raised his eyes above his newspaper!"

"He did when he thought you were not looking at him. I know he was listening to every word we said, and I have the oddest feeling that he may be listening now!"

The door opened as she spoke, and Miss Gateshead's nervous start was infectious enough to make John look round sharply. But it was only the landlady. Piling the plates and cutlery on to a tray, she remarked that it was a foggy night, and that she had tightly closed the shutters in the bedrooms.

"Get a lot of fog hereabouts, we do," she said, wiping a spoon on her apron and casting it into a drawer in the sideboard. "Like a blanket it'll be before morning, but it'll clear."

"Who is our fellow guest?" asked John.

"Mr. Waggleswick? He's an agent of some sort: I don't rightly know. Travels all over, by what he tells me. We've had him here two-three times before. He's not much to look at, but he don't give no trouble. I'll bring your candles in presently. Your room is at the end of the passage, sir; turn to the right at the top of the stairs, and you'll come to it. Fyton took your bags up."

Waggleswick did not return to the coffee-room, and Miss Gateshead and Mr. Cranbrook were left to sit on either side of the fire, chatting cosily together. Miss Gateshead asked him to

tell her about Portugal, and as John had filled a sketchbook with his impressions of an unknown countryside, it was not long before she had persuaded him to fetch it from his room.

The landlord was busy in the crowded taproom across the passage, and Mrs. Fyton was not to be seen, so John went upstairs unescorted, trusting to the landlady's directions.

A hanging oil lamp lit the staircase and cast a feeble light a little way along the passage above, but beyond its radius all was darkness. For a moment John hesitated, half inclined to go back for a candle, but as his eyes grew more accustomed to the murk he thought he could probably grope his way along the corridor to the room at the end. On the way he tripped down one step in the passage and up two others, slightly ricking his ankle in the process and uttering an exasperated oath, but at last he reached the door at the end, opened it and peeped in. By the light of a fire burning in the high-barred grate, he could see his two valises, standing in the centre of the room, and he glanced cursorily round the apartment.

It was of a respectable size and boasted a very large bed, hung with ancient curtains and bearing upon it a quilt so thick as to present more the appearance of a feather mattress than a coverlet. The rest of the furniture was commonplace and old-fashioned and comprised several chairs, a dressing table, a washstand, a huge mahogany wardrobe, a table by the bed, and a wall cupboard on the same side of the room as the fireplace. A pair of dingy blinds imperfectly concealed the warped shutters bolted across the window.

The sketchbook was easily found and he went off with it, shutting the door behind him. He remembered the treacherous steps in the corridor and went more carefully, putting out a hand to feel his way by touching the wall. It encountered not the wall, but something warm and furry.

He snatched his hand back, his eyes straining in the darkness, his heart suddenly hammering. Whatever he had touched was living and silent, and quite motionless. "Who's that?" he said quickly, an unreasoning dread knocking in his chest.

There was a slight pause, as though of hesitation, and then a voice said in a grumbling tone: "Why can't you take care where you're a-going, young master?"

Mr. Cranbrook recognized the voice, and knew that what he had touched was a moleskin waistcoat. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, relieved, yet suspicious.

"What's that to you?" retorted Waggleswick. "I suppose a cove can go to his room without asking *your* leave!"

"I didn't mean— But why were you spying on me?"

"Spying on you? That's a loud one! What would I want to do that for?" said Waggleswick scornfully.

John could think of no reason, and was silent. He heard a movement, and guessed that Waggleswick was walking away from him. Then a door opened farther down the passage and the glow of firelight within the room silhouetted Waggleswick's figure for a brief instant before the door shut behind him.

Miss Gateshead was seated where John had left her. She greeted him with a smile that held some relief.

"The fog muffles all the noises and makes one think the world outside dead!" she said. "I don't think I like this house. A rat has been gnawing in the wainscoting, and a few minutes ago I heard the stairs creak. I thought it must be you. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Certainly not," said John firmly, resolving to make no mention of his encounter with Mr. Waggleswick.

Shortly after ten o'clock the landlady came in bearing tallow candles, stuck into pewter holders, and they left the fireside together to follow Mrs. Fyton upstairs. The light of the candle she carried threw wavering, grotesque shadows on the walls and disclosed, upstairs, two other passages, leading off at right angles from the one which ran the length of the house.

"You know your way, sir," said Mrs. Fyton, nodding a chaperon's dismissal to John. "Come along, miss!"

John could see that Miss Gateshead was looking scared, and he felt an impulse to accompany her, at least to her door. They had reached an excellent understanding by now, and he guessed that this was probably the first time she had ever been alone in a strange inn. However, Mrs. Fyton seemed a motherly woman, so he said goodnight and contented himself with lingering at the head of the stairs until he had seen which door it was that led into Miss Gateshead's room. It lay at the far end of the house to his, with Waggleswick's between them: an arrangement John did not much like.

He went on to his own room. His valises were just as he had left them, and he unpacked such articles as he would require for the night. This done, he undressed and got into bed, setting the candle on the table beside him, and thrusting his watch and his pocket-book under the pillow.

The bed was a feather one, and though rather smothering, not uncomfortable. He opened his book and began to read, occasionally raising his head to listen intently. His room was too far from the taproom for him to be able to hear the murmur of voices there. He heard nothing at all, not even the stir of a mouse.

This dense stillness began presently to make him feel uneasy. It was not very late and it would have been natural had some sounds broken the silence. In any inn one expected to hear noises: the voices of other guests; footsteps; the slam of a door; the clatter of crockery; or the rumble of wheels in the courtyard. It seemed odd that he had seen no servant other than the tapster.

The silence was so profound that more than once he found himself lowering his book to glance round the room; and the creak of the chair in which he had sat to pull off his boots actually made him sit up in bed to make sure that he was alone.

When the candle was burnt down to a stub he began to feel sleepy. He closed the book and snuffed the candle. A faint glow showed that the fire still lived. He turned on his side, the feather bed billowing about him, and in less than ten minutes he was asleep.

He awoke he knew not how much later, but so suddenly and with such a certainty that something had roused him that he was alert on the instant, and listening intently. Not a sound reached his ears. The glow from the hearth had disappeared; the room was in darkness.

He raised himself on one elbow. As he crouched thus, his ears straining, his eyes trying unavailingly to pierce the night, the conviction that he was not alone took such strong possession of his mind that the sweat broke out on him. He stretched out his hand and groped cautiously on the table for the tinderbox. It brushed against the candlestick, which made a tiny sound as it was shifted on the table, and in that moment it seemed to John that something moved in the room. He said breathlessly: "Who's there?"

As he spoke his fingers closed over the tinderbox. He sat up with a jerk, felt the bed move as something cannoned into it, and even as he flung up his hands to grapple his unknown visitant, was thrust roughly down again on to his pillows, a hand clamped over his mouth and another gripping his throat in a strangling hold. He struggled madly, trying to wrench away the clutch on his windpipe. His hands brushed against something warm and furry; a voice breathed in his ear: "Dub your mummer!"

He tore at the unyielding hands, writhing, and trying to kick his feet free of the bedclothes, the bed creaking under his frenzied efforts. The grip on his throat tightened till the blood roared in his ears, and he felt his senses slipping from him. "Still! Still!" hissed Waggleswick. "One squeak out of you and I'll land you a facer as'll put you to sleep for a se'ennight! Bow Street, clodpole! *Bow Street!*"

John stopped struggling, partly from surprise at these last words, partly because the breath was choked out of him. The hand on his throat slightly relaxed its grip. He drew a sobbing breath and distinctly heard the creak of boards under a stealthy footfall. It seemed to come from the direction of the wall-cupboard beside the fireplace.

"For God's sake, lay you still!" Mr. Waggleswick's breath was hot in his ear.

He was free and heard the stir of the bed curtains, as though Waggleswick had shrunk behind them. He lay perfectly still, rigid and sweating. If Waggleswick were indeed a Bow Street Runner, he ought undoubtedly to obey his instructions; if he were not, it did not seem as though he would have much compunction in silencing those who defied him.

The darkness seemed to press on his eyeballs; he had difficulty still in breathing, but his senses were quite acute, and he caught the sound of a key softly, slowly, turning in a lock. This unquestionably came from the direction of the cupboard; a faint lightening of the gloom gradually appeared as the door of the cupboard opened, as though a very dim light had been concealed there. It was obscured by a monstrous shadow, and then dwindled as the door was pushed to again.

A loose floorboard cracked; John's fists clenched unconsciously, but a warning hand coming from out the curtains and pressing his shoulder kept him otherwise motionless.

Someone was coming inch by inch towards the bed: someone who knew the disposition of the furniture so exactly that he made no blunder. The heavy coverlet stirred over John's limbs, and as his hands came up instinctively, smothering folds were over his face, pressing down and down over nose and mouth. He grabbed at this new assailant's wrists, but before his fingers could close on them the pressure abruptly left his face and he heard a sudden scuffle, a strangled, startled oath, and the quick shifting of stockinged feet on the floor.

"The glim! Light the glim!" panted Waggleswick.

A chair went over with a crash; something was knocked flying from the dressing-table as the two men swayed and struggled about the room. John's desperate fingers found the tinder-box, and as he struck it, a heavy thud shook the room.

The tiny flame flared up; the landlord and Waggleswick were writhing and heaving together on the floor, silent but murderous.

John lit the candle and tumbled out of bed, hurrying to Waggleswick's aid. The treatment he had suffered during the last few minutes had shaken him considerably, nor did a wild kick from

one of Fyton's plunging legs improve his condition. The landlord was immensely strong, and for several minutes the two other men found it impossible to overpower him. He and Waggleswick rolled on the floor locked together, but at last John managed to grab one of his arms as he was attempting to gouge out Waggleswick's eye, and he twisted it with all his might.

Waggleswick, who happened at that moment to be uppermost, was thus enabled to drive home a shattering blow to the jaw. This half stunned the landlord, and before he could recover, a pair of handcuffs had been locked around his wrists.

"Bide, you, and watch him!" commanded Waggleswick, out of breath, but still surprisingly active. "Take my barker, and don't stand no gammon!" With that, he thrust a pistol into Mr. Cranbrook's hand, and dived into the cupboard.

John found that his knees were shaking. He sat down, gun in hand. He had only just recovered his breath, when a glimmer of light shone through the cupboard door, growing brighter as footsteps approached. Mr. Waggleswick came back into the room with a lamp.

"Caught both of them redhanded! *She's* as bad as he is, and worse! Get up, hang-gallows!"

He endorsed this command with a kick, and the landlord heaved himself to his feet. A settled, dogged expression had descended on to his face, an expression so malevolent that it was almost impossible for John to believe he could be the same man as the comfortable, smiling host of a few hours earlier.

Waggleswick went on: "Jem and me'll lock the cull and his moll in the cellar till morning. Taken me a rare time to snabble you, my buck, ain't it? Get down them dancers, and don't forget this little pop o' mine!"

He motioned the landlord to go before him into the cupboard, grinning at John's horrified face.

"A stairway. Down to the washhouse. Took me three visits to get a sight of it, too! Ah, and you'd have gone down it if I hadn't been here, master, like a good few other young chubs! To think I been here four times, and never a blow come worth the biting until you walked in tonight, with your pocketbook full o' flimsies, and your talk of no one suspicioning you was in England! Axing your pardon, you was a regular noddy, wasn't you, sir?"

Mr. Cranbrook agreed to it humbly, and brought up the rear of the little procession that wound its way down a steep, twisting stair to a stone-flagged wash-house, where a huge copper was steaming in one corner, and the tapster was standing over Mrs. Fyton, sitting in a chair and loudly protesting her innocence.

"My assistant—junior, o'course, but a fly cove!" said Waggleswick, jerking a thumb at the tapster. "All right, Jem; we'll stow 'em away under hatches now!"

John, whose revolted gaze had alighted on a chopper, lying on a stout, scrubbed table, was looking a little pale. He was left to his own reflections while the prisoners were driven down to the cellar; and his half-incredulous and wholly nauseating inspection of the wash-house made it unnecessary for Waggleswick to inform him, upon his return, that it had been the Fytons' practice to chop up the bodies of their victims, and to boil down the remains in the copper. "Though I don't rightly know what they done with the heads," added Mr. Waggleswick thoughtfully.

A horrible thought crossed John's mind. "Miss Gateshead!"

"She's all right and tight! She was known to be putting up here, and Fyton never ran no silly risks."

John looked at him. "She must not know of this! Has that monster disposed of many travellers in this frightful way?"

"There's no saying," replied Waggleswick. "Not above two or three since we got wind of it in Bow Street. Dear knows 'ow many went into that there copper afore us Runners come down 'ere!"

On this macabre thought, Mr. Cranbrook retired again to his interrupted repose. He considered what plausible tale he would concoct for Miss Gateshead's benefit in the morning.

Miss Gateshead was unbarring the shutters when John came into the coffee-room, and her comments on the lack of orderly management in the inn were pungent.

"I tugged and tugged at the bell, and who do you think brought me a can of hot water at last?" she said. "The tapster!"

"It is too bad! But they werc cast into a pucker by the landlady's being taken ill in the night," explained John glibly. "Should you mind putting on your bonnet and stepping out with me to partake of breakfast elsewhere?"

"Not at all!" replied Miss Gateshead promptly. "I am sorry for the landlady, but she almost deserves to be taken ill for keeping her house in such a shocking state!" She paused, coloured slightly, and said in a shamefaced voice: "I am afraid you must have thought me very foolish last night! Indeed, I cannot imagine what can have possessed me! I never slept better in my life! Is it not odd what absurd fancies one can take into one's head when one is a little tired?"

"Most odd!" agreed Mr. Cranbrook, repressing a shiver. "Most odd!"

Wilson Tucker is forty-two, married, has four children. He has been a film projectionist for twenty-six years and writes fiction for fun, selling his first short story in 1941 for half a cent a word! He is a firm believer in space flight and confidently expects the pioneer trip within the next ten years. He hasn't seen a flying saucer yet.

MCMLIX

By WILSON TUCKER

THE doorbell chimed its familiar one-two-three pattern, a tinkling *ting-ting-thunk*. Henry frowned at the unfinished sentence in the typewriter and twisted around to stare through the window at the drive. People were always annoying him with that out-of-step *ting-ting-thunk*; perhaps if he had the *thunk* fixed they would stop ringing his bell. He leaned a precarious distance from the edge of the chair, trying to peer round the edge of the window. He saw only a car parked outside.

Resigned to the temporary defeat, Henry got up and padded into the adjoining room and to the front door. As he walked he buttoned the sleeves of his shirt and tried to smooth down his hair. It might be a woman waiting on the other side of the door—only last week a charming young miss had stood there, selling pots and pans. He turned the knob and yanked it open.

Two dull-looking gentlemen.

"Mr. Carew?" the nearest gentleman asked politely. "Cary Carew?"

A pleased expression settled on Henry's face. "That's my pen name," he replied pleasantly.

"Ah, yes. Henry Mason, is it not?"

"That's me."

"I know you must be a busy man, Mr. Mason, but may we have a few words with you? My name is Groves."

Henry Mason raised his eyebrows. "What is it?"

Groves deftly reached into an inner pocket and extracted a card. "Scotland Yard," he said politely.

"Now, look," Henry burst out, "I can account for every penny! I always keep my receipts and records and every penny spent was a legitimate expense. I can show you—"

"No, no," Groves said, still politely. "Scotland Yard, Mr. Mason. Not Inland Revenue."

Mason blinked at him. "Oh."

"May we come in? Your neighbours will be watching." He smiled a vacant little smile that meant nothing.

Henry admitted the two of them, the polite Scotland Yard man and his companion who said nothing and did nothing. He led the way into his writing-room because there was an easy chair there and the room was the most comfortable in the house. It was lined with bookshelves and filing cabinets and stacks of typing paper, tools of the writer's trade. He invited the Inspector to take the easy chair, brought in another for the second man, and sat himself down beside the desk to lean warily on the typewriter. Henry said, "My neighbours are always watching me. They think I'm eccentric."

"Indeed?" Still the politeness.

"Camouflage." Henry waved a casual hand. "It lends an aura of glamour and mystery to my activities and sometimes increases the sale of my books. Besides—it keeps them away from me. Always prying."

"I see." The Inspector studied the writer.

Without speaking, Henry held out his hand to him. The Inspector stared at the open palm and then, as if guessing his thoughts, brought out the identity card a second time, opened it, and placed it in Henry's hand. Henry brought it close to his eyes, read the Inspector's brief description, looked at the name, carefully examined the small photograph and then peered up at the man, comparing the photograph with the face. Yes—unless the whole thing was a forgery, this was actually Inspector Arthur Groves of Scotland Yard.

"Satisfied?"

"I suppose so. And this isn't about my taxes, eh?"

"No indeed, another matter entirely. Mr. Mason, we have been reading some of your most recent stories."

Cary Carew beamed. "Did you like them?"

"I'm afraid I'm not a competent judge," the Inspector told him. "It isn't their merit that we are interested in, Mr. Mason, but their content. Some of your newer stories have chronicled the adventures of a government secret agent, and their content has been . . . er, interesting in the extreme."

Cary Carew fixed the Inspector with a cold and beady eye. "Big Brother stuff!" he snapped.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, 'Big Brother stuff.' You're going to tell me what to think and what to write! I knew the government would come to this!"

Groves frowned ever so slightly. "But that isn't true at all, Mr. Mason. I have no intention of telling you what to write. My only purpose is to inquire into the content of some stories you've already written and published."

Henry stared at the man for a long moment or two, his memory rushing back over the more recent tales that had appeared in print. His manner was an odd mixture of frightened Mason and defiant Carew. Very well—if he was being sent to the Tower he would go with head high. "I sometimes manage to include a bit of my personal philosophy in my fiction. And now Whitehall has discovered that, and you descend upon me like a cloud of locusts." He looked around at the second man and thought to correct himself. "Two locusts."

Groves stared across the room at his silent companion. The companion broke his silence. "Eccentric," he muttered.

Groves shook his head and patiently began again. "Mr.



Mason, you persist in misunderstanding me. I am not interested in your thought or your philosophy. I am interested only in certain phases of your stories dealing with this government secret agent, this fellow—what is his name?"

"Dan Devlin," Cary Carew supplied promptly.

"Yes, Dan Devlin. This Mr. Devlin is a remarkable fellow. I might say he has seen more action in his brief career than I have in my entire life at the Yard."

"Thank you."

"To get to the point, Mr. Mason, this Dan Devlin chap knows a little more about government secrets than we do ourselves."

"Oh?"

"Yes. For instance in one recent story, you have him thwart an enemy spy who is intent on stealing plans for the latest nuclear device. As I recall, he succeeds in trapping and capturing the spy and in recovering the stolen documents. But Mr. Mason, you then proceed to reveal the contents of those documents by causing your hero to read them, thus allowing the readers to learn them. The documents are read off in detail. You specify the exact amount of nuclear material necessary to critical mass, you describe the materials of which the bomb casing is made, you draw a verbal picture of the triggering device which causes the bomb to explode, and you then show the exact amount of damage the bomb will do to a given area."

"Of course," Cary Carew said happily. He waved to the well-filled bookshelves about him. "I always do research."

"But it isn't public knowledge," the Inspector said. "Or wasn't, until you wrote it." He seemed bitter.

"Well-documented research always lends an aura of authenticity," Carew proudly explained.

"Perhaps you didn't understand me. I said it wasn't public knowledge. It was on the secret list."

Henry stared at him. "What was?"

"The entire data concerning the bomb which you published in the story."

"Nonsense," the writer said.

The second man leaned forward in his chair to fix Mason with a probing glare. "It isn't nonsense. How do you explain it?"

"Who are you?" Henry demanded.

"Clark," the other snapped. "S.B."

"What's that?" Henry wanted to know.

"You should know," Clark retorted with a suggestion of wryness. "Your Devlin character works for us."

"Oh, *that*. The Special Branch. And do you enjoy reading my stories?"

"We've been reading them—closely. What about it?"

"What about what?"

"Where did you get the secret information?"

"Research, I told you."

"Research my foot! It hasn't been published."

Henry sat up triumphantly. "But there I've got you! It has."

"Has not."

"Has." He pointed dramatically. "Over there." His triumphant finger indicated an encyclopaedia set. The set was his pride and joy, a veritable gold mine of information on every subject under the sun. Time and again it had come to his rescue to provide an authentic background, a tropical setting, a concise history or a hidden date or fact. It had repaid him many times its cost already.

The man from the Special Branch glanced at the set only long enough to identify it. "I hope you've got a good alibi."

Cary Carew gave him a scornful glance. "I can't understand how you got into the Special Branch. You can't come to a rational conclusion until you've examined the evidence. Dan Devlin lives by that rule."

"Just between you and me, old man, Dan Devlin hasn't long to live. *Where* did you get the information?"

"There!" Henry almost shrieked.

"Oh, have a look and let's get on with it," Groves interposed. He had lost a modicum of his politeness. "We want to find out about that rocket material, as well."

Cary Carew brightened. "Oh yes, my Woomera story. One of my better ones, really. The enemy spy gave Devlin a real chase for his money in that one."

Groves said wearily, "Between the enemy spy and Dan Devlin, several cats were let out of the bag in that one. Where did you obtain the secret information on the fuel mixture used to fire the rocket, and where did you get the data on the height it reached and the meteorological matter it obtained while up there, and how did you learn of the alloy and construction methods used in the rocket? How did you know the exact date it was fired, and how long it was up there, and where it fell and how much of it was recovered?"

A casual Carew pointed to the encyclopaedia set, his expression revealing his opinion of real-life secret service agents.

Clark was fingering the pages of the first volume, leafing towards the section headed *atom*. Henry watched him, inwardly grinning. Clark finally reached *atom*, turned a few more pages to *atomic energy*, and settled back to read. The room was quiet except for a solitary fly buzzing against the window, vainly

seeking an exit. Henry glanced around his den, examining his many bookshelves, fondly contemplating the filing cabinets, feeling quite proud of it all. His filing cabinets bulged with already-published stories and early drafts of others waiting only to be polished and sent off. His shelves contained an abundance of invaluable reference books.

Upon those few occasions when he was called upon to lecture at a Women's Institute or a students' meeting, he liked to say that a successful writer is a well-read writer. It was best to instil in those eager minds that there was no short cut to literary fame, no easy way; one must—

"No!" Clark's startled yell punctured his thoughts and the silence of the room. "It *is* here!"

"Of course," Cary Carew said with simple dignity. Authenticity was the lifeblood of fine fiction.

"What?" an incredulous Groves demanded.

"Every blasted word of it," Clark declared. "Word for word!"

"Oh, come now," Carew protested mildly. "I'm not a plagiarist. I always make a point of rewriting my source material."

"But it can't be—it hasn't been released!"

"Has," Henry repeated.

"This is impossible! It isn't supposed to be in public print."

"Is," Henry said.

"There's something wrong here—something awfully wrong."

"You," Henry suggested.

Groves reached for the volume and almost tore it from his companion's hand. Clark whirled to the bookcase and searched rapidly along the spines. He was searching for the matter on rocketry, especially those recent rockets fired from the Woomera range.

"Volume twenty-nine," Henry said helpfully.

Clark muttered his thanks and jerked at the volume. The period of silence was repeated and, in due time, the stunned exclamation of disbelief. Groves meanwhile had read the article on atomic energy and was gaping at the wallpaper. There, in print, was a concise summary of millions of secret words! It was fantastic. He looked across the room to Clark's face and found a similar answer there. Clark had just finished reading another summary on the secret experimental rockets. Wonderingly, Groves turned over the volume in his hands and stared at the spine. The encyclopaedia had been published by an old and respected London firm.

"What else," he asked, in somewhat of a daze, "has Dan Devlin done? What more have you released?"

"Well," Cary Carew said modestly, "there was the adventure of the atomic cannon, and some nasty business involving plutonium hand grenades, and just now a magazine is preparing for publication my latest story about biological warfare. An enemy spy sneaks into the Research Establishment at—"

A suspicious Clark cut him off short. "Is *that* in here too?" Henry nodded. "Volume three, I think."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," Henry assured him.

Groves seemed to have recovered his presence of mind. "Where did you get this encyclopaedia set?"

"From a travelling salesman."

"A travelling salesman?"

"Yes. There's always somebody calling here, interrupting my work. The doorbell is broken—well, not broken altogether, but it goes *ting-ting-thunk* you see, and it gets on my nerves after a time. Only I didn't mind one day last week because a good-looking girl called selling pots and pans, and I said to her—What?"

"The book salesman," Groves repeated impatiently.

"He was just a pedlar. I was working on something or other and the doorbell went *ting-ting-thunk* and there he stood. I really didn't mind after a while because it *is* a good set, and I needed it. Twenty-five pounds."

"Twenty-five pounds!" Clark was holding his head in his hands. "More than ten years' work, for twenty-five pounds."

"What's the matter with him?" Henry asked.

Groves regarded Henry Mason as he would a child.

"He's upset," he explained clearly and slowly. "He's unhappy. He's a Special Branch man. For ten years or more he and hundreds like him have laboured long and hard to keep our secrets *secret*, to keep them from the prying eyes of the world, and you buy a set of books which permits your Dan Devlin to reveal everything. To be blunt, he's disenchanted."

Henry gazed at Clark's bent head and said, "Oh."

"Now listen carefully. I want you to tell me about this salesman; I want you to describe him in detail, and repeat what he said to you. I want to know the whole thing."

"Why?"

"Because it still might not be too late. If only a few thousand copies of this set have been sold, we may be able to gather them up and burn them."

"You expect me to remember a casual transaction that happened a year ago?" Henry demanded petulantly.

"You have a keen ear for dialogue," Groves said.

The unfair blow found its mark. "Certainly," Henry declared. "Well now, let me think . . ." He closed his eyes and put his fingertips on them. "It was like this . . ."

The doorbell had chimed its familiar one-two-three pattern, a tinkling *ting-ting-thunk*. Henry frowned at the galley proofs he was reading, and twisted round in his chair to stare through the window. One irritating interruption after another; if he didn't finish correcting the proofs and get them off in another day then they would be late reaching the printer—and in all likelihood his book wouldn't be published in time for the Christmas trade after all. And in addition to all those horrible things, Miss Winston in his publisher's production department would write him a scathing letter.

Henry sighed and pushed the galleys aside, to get up from the desk and go through the adjoining room to the door. He opened it and found an elderly gentleman wearing a walrus moustache standing there and beaming cheerily.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Carew, good morning, good morning. A fine day for the creative instinct, is it not? And how is your work going?"

"Not too bad," Cary Carew told him. "But I don't want any."

"Mr. Carew, how can you say that? No man may boast he is well-read or well-informed without a solid background in the literary treasure of the world, a repository of the accumulated wealth and knowledge of the centuries. Mr. Carew, a man of your reputation simply can't afford to be without one."

Cary Carew watched the walrus moustache bouncing on the fellow's upper lip as he talked. "Without one what?"

"Mr. Carew, I was hoping you would ask me that question! It reveals you as a man of discernment, a man of eager and inquiring mind, a man who seeks truth and light in an otherwise dark and ignorant world. Mr. Carew, you may well pride yourself on your advanced mental faculties." The elderly gentleman blew steadily on, bewailing the backward ways of the outside world and loudly admiring the towering pillar of strength and light in the person of Cary Carew. The moustache wagged madly and the old gentleman worked up quite a head of steam. "You, sir," he said, "need one."

"Need one what?" Henry repeated.

"A modern and up-to-date world encyclopaedia in thirty-six magnificent volumes, a store-house of knowledge smartly and fully covering the world of yesterday and today. I happen to have in my hand the initial volume. Notice the fine binding and

the delicate, expensive gold-leaf lettering; now let us open a few pages so that you may see the expensive printing techniques and the sturdy paper. This set is guaranteed to last a lifetime, Mr. Carew, and the lifetimes of those children who will come after you."

"I'm not married," Henry told him.

"A man of your literary worth simply can't afford to be without one."

"How much?" Henry asked cautiously.

"Only twenty-five guineas. A rare bargain in this day of advancing prices and shoddy materials."

Henry fingered the volume. "Is it new?" he asked suddenly. "I don't want anything out of date—"

"New? My dear Mr. Carew, look at this!" And the salesman opened the front cover to turn a few pages, stopping at last at a coloured frontispiece facing the title page. He turned the book so that Henry might see. Lithographed in four beautiful colours was a picture of a handsome and distinguished man, while below it ran the printed legend:

The Prime Minister

The Rt. Hon. Harold Macmillan, M.P.

"Well, yes," Henry agreed. "It's new all right." His practiced eye ran down the title page, noting the type arrangement and layout, the names of the several editors and the publisher, coming to rest at last on the copyright date. The Roman numerals caught his eye, and he returned to read them a second time, more slowly.

"Aha!" he crowed in the salesman's face. "An error!"

"No!" The walrus moustache shot high.

"Yes. It so happens I can read Roman numerals. Look at this: MCMLIX. Clearly, a typographical error. The proof-reader was not on the job."

"Oh, dear, dear," the salesman said. "Tch, tch. Mr. Carew, I am most distressed at this flaw in my offering. I am moved to make a reduction. Twenty-five pounds."

Henry grinned to himself, believing he had driven a hard bargain. "I'll take it."

The old gentleman scurried out to a car standing in the drive and returned with the remaining thirty-five volumes. He accepted Henry's cheque, bade him a cheery farewell, and drove away. Henry at once forgot about the waiting galley proofs, and sat down to search for information he might put into the hands of Dan Devlin.

"And that's all there was to it," he said to Groves.

Groves had followed the recital by opening the first volume at the lithographed picture and the title page. Now he stared at the copyright line. "What does MCMLIX mean? Why is it an error?"

Henry leaned over his shoulder. "The MCM is nineteen hundred; that first M indicates one thousand while the following CM indicates nine hundred—a hundred less than a thousand. Had the C followed the M it would have indicated one hundred plus a thousand. So, nineteen hundred. The L is fifty and the IX, nine, 1959. It should have read 1957, of course."

Across the room, Clark was rapidly pulling volumes from the shelf to examine the date in each. After a while he looked up. "They all have the same date."

"Of course," Henry agreed. "I got twenty-five shillings off." He added, "I've had only one disappointment with the set. There's nothing in it about the space-station."

Clark jerked around suddenly. "Space-station?"

"Yes, you know. During the last war, Germany had plans for a space-platform to be anchored in the sky—a thousand miles up. After the war the Allies took the plans. There has been an awful lot of speculation in the magazines about the space-station, pictures and so on: some say it will be a refuelling station for rockets going to the moon, and others say it will make a military observation post as it circles the earth. It had occurred to me that Dan Devlin could make an adventure of it."

"And there is nothing in these books about it?" Clark demanded anxiously. "Nothing about a space-station?"

"Not a word. Quite disappointing, really."

Clark looked at Groves, closed his eyes and sighed. Quite clearly and audibly he thanked his God. When he had opened them again he made a request of Henry.

"I want to use your telephone."

"Here." He pointed.

Henry and Groves remained silent, listening. They couldn't help listening because the instrument was so near. Clark called his headquarters in London and described the entire situation; holding a volume in his hand, he read off the title page and then told of the typographical error that had been discovered, told of the supposedly secret information contained in its pages, and told how Dan Devlin had made free use of that information to win many fictional battles with an enemy spy. There followed a long period of silence. Clark waited, staring out of the window, turning round to find the two men watching him.

"They're checking with the publisher," he explained to Groves. Groves nodded and the silence went on. After several

minutes the distant voice spoke again and the Special Branch man exploded. "But it *is*! I've got one right here in my hand!" The voice continued briskly. Clark said, "Yes, he's here with me. He'll verify it. Thirty-six volumes." He listened and his face became a dull crimson. He said finally, stiffly, "Yes, sir," and hung up.

Groves watched him expectantly.

"That edition doesn't exist," Clark said, waving his hand at the bookshelf. "The publishers haven't printed it yet."

"Nonsense," Henry exclaimed.

Clark stabbed a glance at the writer. "The publishers said they haven't issued an edition of that encyclopaedia since 1949. He said also they are considering a new edition in about two years, pending the release of certain material. In short, if enough is released to make a new edition worth while, they'll go ahead."

"Twenty-five pounds," Henry reminded him, pointing to the sprawled books. "I've used them for months."

"Yes, you have." Clark brought forth a wallet and carefully counted out twenty-five pounds. He handed the money to the writer. "I'll need a receipt."

"What's this for?"

"For an encyclopaedia which doesn't exist. My orders are to seize the books."

"You can't do that!"

"I am doing it. The receipt, please."

"But I need that set!"

"You can buy another," Clark reminded him, and then added bitterly, "And this time buy a set that *does* exist. Buy some that were printed a few years ago." He stooped and began picking up books. Groves jumped to help him.

Henry watched them.

"Big Brothers!" he snarled suddenly.

The doorbell chimed its familiar one-two-three pattern, *ting-ting-thunk*. Henry paused in the middle of a sentence and contemplated stuffing the chimes with rags to prevent the constant interruptions. It had been difficult enough the last few days without the familiar volumes to encourage him, and at the moment Dan Devlin was involved in a plot with counterfeiters that was downright stupid.

He growled aloud and pushed back the chair to go to the door. A shiny new car stood in the drive, a car he had never seen before. It seemed to resemble those experimental models found only at motor shows, a hint of things to come. The car was very low and sleek and futuristic.

He stared in wonder, and a voice below the level of his eyes sang out a cheery greeting. "Ah, good morning, Mr. Carew, good morning, good morning! A striking day for the creative urge of an author, is it not? And how is your good work progressing?"

Cary Carew dropped his gaze from the remarkable car to stare at the elderly gentleman wearing a walrus moustache.

"Bad," he said. "I lost my encyclopaedia set and can't do research."

"Indeed, sir?" the old man exclaimed. "How very fortunate that I came along. I happen to have in my hand the initial volume of a brand-new edition, fresh from the presses. Let your fingers feel the fine texture of the cloth, examine if you will the strong, white paper and the large easy-to-read type. I assure you, Mr. Carew, this new edition will supplant in every way all other encyclopaedias, bringing to the fore as it does the latest developments the world over! And at the same amazing low price of twenty-five guineas."

Cary Carew regarded him closely. "Does it tell all about the space-platform?"

"Of course, of course, my dear sir. The latest reports about the entire matter, plus of course allied fields. This new edition is years ahead of all others. But come with me and see for yourself."

The old fellow turned and hurried to the shining new car. Inside the boot was the encyclopaedia set, and in three trips he and Cary Carew had carried the thirty-six volumes to the door. "I invite your closest inspection, Mr. Carew. A man of your outstanding intelligence wants only the best."

Cary Carew reached down for the volume indexed *Soci-Sude* and riffled the pages, seeking out the desired subject matter. His eyes opened wide in delight. There it was, some three and a half columns concerning space-stations, space-platforms, orbits, military advantages and the like.

"Sold!" he declared instantly.

"A most discerning gentleman," the salesman said.

Hurriedly, Henry had a belated second thought and turned back to the title page to read the copyright date. His accusing eyes lifted to the old gentleman's face and he wagged a reproving finger beneath the moustache.

"Tch, tch," he said. "The same error."

"Really?" the salesman asked. He peered at the offending date. "This is most unfortunate."

"MCMLXI," Henry read aloud. "That's 1961. Your proof-readers aren't very alert."

"I admire your vast knowledge, sir!" the salesman said.

"Your wits are as sharp as your eyes. Suppose I reduce the price by twenty-five shillings?"

"Sold," Henry repeated, and wrote out a cheque. He carried the thirty-six volumes inside the door, and then waited to watch the old gentleman drive away. That was certainly a spectacular car—something you wouldn't expect to find on the streets for five or ten years yet.

Henry selected the one prized volume and retired to his den. He drew from the typewriter the counterfeiting story and threw it in the wastepaper basket, settling back to read all about space-stations.

The article sounded as though the space-station already existed. Cary Carew began mentally fabricating a story; Dan Devlin was once more on the trail.

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SCREAM

IN THE DARK

PAULINE glanced at the mantelpiece clock. Nine-thirty-two. She sighed, turned to another page in the book.

She looked again at the clock. She had been restless since nine o'clock, waiting for the telephone to ring. Tom had promised he would phone the minute he arrived at the station, and he was half an hour late.

She tried not to think of the time; but it wasn't like Tom. Often he stayed on late at the office, but tonight he knew the Cornfolds were away, and that she'd be alone in this big house.

The house *was* huge, and isolated, too. This stretch of Hampshire could be as dark and lonely at night as a Highland moor and Tom worried when she was left alone, though he tried to make a joke of it. As the train pulled into the station that morning he'd said, "I'll try to be home by seven tonight. Think you can manage till then without me?"

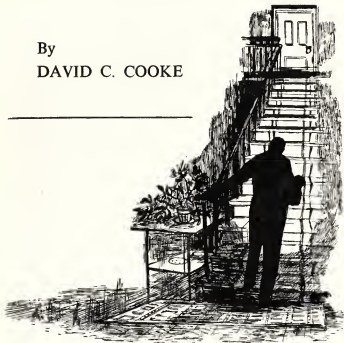
After he'd arrived at the office he'd telephoned: he had to go out of town, he might be delayed for two hours longer than he expected. He'd added, as an afterthought, that she should ring up Bill Chesley if she became too lonely, and ask him to come over for a drink.

She'd shivered when he'd mentioned Bill. Bill Chesley had always been one of their closest friends, but since the last time she met him she never wanted to see him again: the thought of the way he had stared at her brought an eerie, hair-raising tingle all along her spine.

She got up now and paced uneasily round the room. Tom's nervousness for her was communicating itself to her, making her worried, and she looked anxiously at the clock. Nine-thirty-five, and still the phone had not rung. What was keeping Tom? Where could he be? The thought came to her suddenly that he might be delayed overnight, but she dismissed this as absurd.

The soft, faraway purr of a car racing over the dark, winding

By
DAVID C. COOKE



road made her smile with relief. The car was undoubtedly a taxi bringing Tom from the station. He hadn't stopped to telephone. She stepped quickly to the mirror and fixed her face. Mustn't let him know that she had worried.

The car raced closer and closer, the sound of the engine growing to a roar in the still night. In another few seconds it would brake to a stop, a door would open and slam, and Tom would come whistling up the flagstone path.

But the car didn't stop. It went on down the hill, tyres humming, and Pauline felt her heart plummet with it. She had been so sure, so positive it was Tom, that the disappointment left her almost weak, and she felt the unreasoning fears taking hold of her.

Suddenly she thought of Bill Chesley again, and again her spine tingled. Last night Tom had been working and she had driven Mr. and Mrs. Cornfold to the station. She had seen Bill as she set off for home, just as she was leaving the station car park. Bill had stepped in front of the car and she had jammed on the brakes. He'd had a girl with him, a girl she didn't know,

an attractive and shapely redhead in forest green, and he was arguing violently with her.

"Look where you're going, pedestrian," Pauline had called out. "If you want to kill yourself, don't do it on our insurance."

She had meant it as a joke, but Bill hadn't taken it that way. He had stared at her, his eyes cold and hard, his mouth a thin white line of hate. And then, without a word, he had taken the girl's arm and pulled her roughly aside behind the other cars.

On the way home Pauline had been haunted by the memory of Bill's face. She hadn't said anything to Tom about the encounter. She knew that he would laugh and call it woman's imagination.

She looked at the clock once more. Nine-thirty-eight. Nine-thirty-eight? How could that be possible? Only three minutes since she'd heard the car come over the hill? It seemed more like three hours . . .

She sat down, tried to quiet herself. She must be sensible, realize that there was nothing to be afraid of, that darkness was nature's way of resting after a day of work. There was nothing out there except insects and rabbits and squirrels . . .

She got up from the sofa. There was nothing out there, but she would feel more secure with the windows shut and locked. If only Tom hadn't put these ideas into her head. She darted quickly from one window to another, slamming them down and locking them. Then she sat down, exhausted.

Almost immediately she was on her feet again. She had forgotten the upstairs windows.

Her legs seemed weighted as she tried to hurry up the stairs. One by one she closed the windows, and when she reached the last one—the one on the north side of her own bedroom—she sighed in relief.

And then her heart stopped.

Someone—something—was out there in the darkness. Nor was it an insect or a small animal. It was something big, something that walked slowly, dragging its feet through the grass. Pauline's body went numb and a scream formed itself in her throat. This was what she had dreaded. This—this—*thing*—was what she had been waiting for, praying against. It was coming towards the house, steadily, purposefully, unhurried.

A little whimpering sound forced itself up from her throat. She wanted to run, to hide somewhere and slam the door. But she stood transfixed, unable to move, unable to breathe, her eyes wide with horror.

She prayed fervently for Tom to come home. He'd have to hurry, hurry, hurry! Another few minutes of this suspense and

something terrible would happen. She would never be able to stand the strain. She knew she wouldn't.

She thought of Bill Chesley again now. She'd been a fool not to phone him. Bill was their best friend and would have been glad to come. She had been stupid to think that that meeting last night had meant anything. He was upset by arguing with the girl, or perhaps he didn't see her properly in the dark.

But it was too late now. She was alone—terribly alone—and the slow footsteps outside were sounding louder and louder . . .

And then, dimly by the light of the moon, she could make out a figure. It was a man, but no such man as she had ever met. He looked like something out of a nightmare, a stoop-shouldered hulk of a man with frightfully long arms hanging at his sides. A battered hat was pulled low over his head, and his clothes were ragged and baggy.

Pauline gasped for breath, and the force of air seared her lungs. She tried to wet her lips, but her tongue was dry and swollen. Then she realized that she was shivering as violently as if she were standing nude in a wintry blizzard.

She watched with horrified fascination as the man stepped softly up to the porch. He disappeared from sight within the porch, and then small metallic sounds came to her sensitive ears. He was trying the doorknob—softly, firmly.

And then she screamed. It was the wrong thing to do, but she couldn't help it. It was involuntary, like the dryness of her mouth. The breath had forced its way up in a mighty jet of sound that hurt her throat.

The man stepped back into view, his lips parted in an inane smile, and Pauline screamed again.

Then the man was speaking in a hoarse, unnaturally strained whisper. "Telegram fer you, missus."

Pauline's heart thumped wildly.

"P—put it under the door," she managed, her voice thin and lifeless. "I—I can't come down now."

But he did not move. And she knew there was no telegram. "G—go away," she went on desperately. "Go away or I'll call my husband!"

The man smiled again, and Pauline realized he knew that she was alone. She felt like fainting but knew that she mustn't.

"I'll phone the police if you don't leave this instant," she said. "It won't take them five minutes to get here. Now go, quickly! I won't warn you again!"

The man moved, but not towards the road. He turned back to the front door, his shoes clumping heavily. Pauline heard the

doorknob turn again, and the hinges creaked as he put his shoulder against the door and strained. Then the house trembled and there was the groan of wood. He was trying to break the door by throwing his body against it.

The blood froze in Pauline's veins. She knew that she would have to have help. But how? The nearest neighbour was more than a mile away, and she couldn't risk going downstairs to phone the police. She was trapped . . .

And then the pounding at the door stopped. The man came into sight again, but this time he did not glance up at the window. He was going round to the back of the house.

Pauline raced to the back bedroom and peered out of the window, searching in the shadows for the man.

Then she saw him. But he was not going to the back door. He went on to the toolshed next to the garage. He opened the door and went in. A match flickered faintly. Then he came out and closed the door. He had a sledge-hammer in his hand.

Frantic strength surged through Pauline as she realized the purpose of the sledge-hammer. She would have to act quickly. There would only be seconds, but it would be enough. She rushed down the stairs to the telephone.

"Exchange! Exchange!" she screamed into the mouthpiece. "Police! Hurry! It's an emergency!" She jiggled the phone rest madly, but there was no answer.

The phone was dead, and she knew that the wires had been cut.

She heard her own voice making queer little noises as the first sledge-hammer blow struck the door with a splintering of wood. Her brain seemed twisted into a knot of terror as she wondered frantically what to do, where to hide from this man smashing his way into her house.

She thought of her bedroom, and rushed back up the stairs. She slammed the door and turned the key. She leaned back against the wall, too weak to move.

There was another crashing blow at the front door. Then silence. She knew that the man was now inside, that it would only be a matter of minutes before he found her . . .

She heard his heavy footsteps going towards the dining-room, then the kitchen. He stopped. A door opened and slammed again. Then another. She knew that he was looking for her, searching everywhere. Seconds later another door opened, and she heard footsteps going down into the cellar. Almost immediately, it seemed, he was coming back again. He returned to the sitting-room. Then he started to come upstairs.

She watched in a hypnotic stupor as the knob turned on the bedroom door. The door was locked. Pauline knew it, but

that did not stop the flow of cold sweat on her skin. The man would still have the sledge-hammer, and now he knew where she was hiding. He would be through the door in seconds.

A strangled cry welled in her throat as the hammer exploded against the door. She flung herself towards a window and clawed at the latch. It was fastened tightly, and she tugged desperately, grazing her fingers in her haste.

Then suddenly she was out on the little roof of the porch. It was not pitched at a steep angle, but it was enough to make her stumble and fall. She landed on her side and rolled over towards the edge. Then her groping hands closed over the rain gutter and her body swung like a pendulum. She kicked to stop the swinging and let go, to drop to the grass and tumble over. Instantly she was up again and running towards the road.

She heard a shout behind her. The man was at her bedroom window. He flung a leg over the window sill and stepped out to the porch roof. As he jumped she saw that he still carried the sledge-hammer.

Pauline felt as if she were running through a bog. Every step was a struggle, and she thought that she was almost standing still. Her legs were leaden and could be lifted and thrust forward only by concentrated effort. A few more yards, she thought, and she would surely drop.

Then her heels clicked on a hard surface. She had somehow reached the road. Now, if only a car would come by! But she knew that it was not probable. The road was lonely and rarely used at night.

She cast another glance back towards the house. The man was no more than thirty yards behind her. He ran unhurriedly, knowing that he would catch her.

Another scream burst from her, and she veered sharply towards the woods bordering the road. Perhaps she could hide in the bushes, she thought. Anything was worth trying.

She scurried up the steep embankment. But her shoes were inadequate for such rough climbing, and she slipped to hands and knees. Then she was up again, digging in, fighting her way towards the protection of the brushwood.

The footsteps were right behind her now and she could hear the man's laboured breathing. And then a rough hand grabbed her ankle . . .

Suddenly something happened to Pauline. She was terrorized, but the instinct for self-preservation was strong. She kicked back with her feet, pointing her toes up to strike with the heels.

The man cursed and let her ankle go. The respite would be

short, she knew, but she was able to gain the top of the embankment. Then she was running again. She felt that she had never done anything all her life except run and scream, and now her head was reeling with a strange lightness.

She plunged into the thicket, and twigs and branches tore at her clothing. Her dress ripped across the front and a pointed branch raked painfully down her leg.

She heard the man crashing through the undergrowth behind her, and the horrible realization came that she had made a mistake. He could catch her easily in the woods, and no one would be able to see what he did with her!

She stopped and looked around with fear-glazed eyes, not knowing which way to turn. This was the end. Her last bit of strength had been sapped away. She could do nothing but stand and watch with dazed horror as the man came towards her.

He advanced slowly, cautiously, ready to lunge after her. But she did not move. She stood and stared at him as the distance shortened and she could smell the warmth of his body and feel his breath on her face.

"Stop!" she screamed. "Stop! Please don't do it! I'll give you anything!"

The man laughed, his voice harsh and guttural. "I'm going to kill you," he whispered. He dropped the sledge-hammer he still carried and his hands came out and fastened about her throat. He pushed her back against a tree and his grip tightened, his thumbs closing over her windpipe.

Pauline tried to breathe, tried instinctively to gasp for breath. Her lungs ached with the effort, and a stabbing pain shot through her eyes. She was choking from the force of the steel band around her neck.

She wanted to fight against it but she had no weapon except her feet and her hands. And the man's face was close, his eyes burning into her, his mouth a twisted snarl.

With frantic effort, she lashed out with her sharp fingernails. She gouged at his eyes. Pushing, tearing, scratching. At the same time she kicked at his shins, swinging her feet hard.

The man screamed in pain, and suddenly his hands dropped from her throat and clawed at his eyes. But Pauline did not run. It was now or never. It was a chance she would not have again.

Breathing heavily, she leaned over and searched the leaf-covered ground with her hands. Then she found what she wanted. She straightened and stepped towards the man. She raised her hands above her head and brought them down sharply. There was a dull, sickening thud as the sledge-hammer crashed against the man's skull.

But he did not go down. Not right away. His knees flexed, then straightened as if he were about to jump. Then, slowly, his hands dropped to his sides. He fell forward on his face and lay still.

Pauline felt limp and weak. Tears of relief swam in her eyes and a lump came to her throat. She collapsed against a tree, overwhelmed with what she had done. And then shock seized her and she laughed shrilly, hysterically, senselessly.

A muffled roar sounded in the distance. It was a car, and Tom was in it. She knew that this time she had to be right.

She moved slowly back to the road, half crawling, half walking. But still she held tightly to the hammer. It was her only defence, and the man might recover. She dragged herself to the embankment just as twin beams of light appeared at the top of the hill. And then she lay still, unable to move an inch farther.

She followed the car with her eyes, hoping, praying. She watched it start down the hill and held her breath. It was going too fast to be stopping here. She groaned silently in despair. But then there was a sudden squealing of brakes, and the car jerked to a stop.

"Tom!" she cried hoarsely. "Tom!" Her voice sounded like a whisper in her ears, and she knew that he would never hear her. Then she thought of the hammer. She dragged it forward with both hands, struggling with its weight. And rolled it over the embankment.

"What was that?" she heard Tom exclaim, and the sound of his voice gave her strength.

"Tom!" she sobbed again. "Over here, Tom! Over here!"

He jumped from the car, his face tight with concern. Then he saw her, and cried, "Pauline! Thank God!" Moments later his warm, comforting arms were around her.

"I tried to phone you," he said, "but there was no answer and I knew you wouldn't have gone out. I was afraid that something terrible had happened."

A flood of relief overwhelmed Pauline and her arms clung to him. She tried to tell him what had happened, but the words came out in a jumbled, incoherent babble.

"Take it easy, darling," Tom cautioned. "You're all right now. There's nothing to worry about."

She told him again, briefly. "I—I think I killed a man. He tried to murder me. It was awful, Tom, awful!" She pointed back towards the thicket. "He—he's in there!"

Tom gathered her up in his arms and carried her into the house. He lowered her to the sofa and poured a glass of brandy. "Here," he said, holding it to her lips. "Drink it." Then, while

the taxi driver stayed with her, he went out again. He returned a few minutes later, and his face was puzzled.

"Is—is he dead?" Pauline asked breathlessly.

Tom shook his head. "Fractured skull, it looks like. He's unconscious."

Pauline breathed a sigh of relief. She wouldn't have wanted to kill a man, no matter who. Then she noticed the queer light in Tom's eyes, the puzzled expression on his face.

"It's Bill," he said quietly.

"What?" Pauline exclaimed. "No. It can't be. It couldn't be Bill. He hadn't any reason. Why, I saw him last night, and he—"

Suddenly she remembered the terrible glare in Bill's eyes as she'd joked with him, and she also remembered the eyes of the burly man who had tried to murder her. The two pictures fused, and she realized that they were the same. It had been Bill after all, but she had been too terrified to see through the disguise.

"I saw him last night," she went on dully. "At the station. He had a girl with him—and they were arguing. I—I said something to him—joking—and he glared at me and dragged the girl away. She was—she had red hair. I had never seen her—"

"A redhead?" the taxi driver broke in abruptly. "Are you sure she had red hair?"

Pauline nodded. "I saw her clearly. She was—crying."

"And a green dress? Dark green?"

She nodded again. "Yes. But I don't see what that has to do—"

"Lady," the driver said excitedly, "it's got everything to do with it, believe me! And he had a hell of a good reason to want you out of the way. They found a redhead just off the Bournemouth road this afternoon. A model, so they say. The police have been trying to find the man she was with last night. They reckon he'll know how she got her head bashed in!"

Pauline looked from the driver to Tom, then back again. "You mean he killed her? How horrible!"

"It was in the evening papers," Tom said, his voice flat. "It was a brutal murder. That's the reason Bill wanted to kill you," he added. "You would have been able to identify him as her last escort. We'll have to notify the police."

Panic raced through Pauline again and she struggled up from the sofa. "No, Tom, no," she pleaded. "Don't leave me!"

He smiled and took her in his arms. "Don't worry about that, darling," he said. "The driver will tell them. I'll never leave you alone again as long as I live."

Mark Derby and the Far East came together during spells of Army Intelligence work in Hong Kong and Indonesia. After the war he lived for six months in a village of head-hunters and, strangely enough, made some lasting friends there ; at present he lives in Minorca and conducts Dyak-trained operations against the pests in his garden.

THE MAN WHO SOLD SILENCE

By MARK DERBY

AT 10.30 that all-important morning, James Silver straightened up from planting a mimosa tree by his garden gate and swept the shining Mediterranean bay with a blue glance. He was almost completely happy. He stood on his own land near the end of a fifteen-year dream. After fifteen years of homeless, friendless wandering in the shadows he had come out into the sunshine. He had found what finally he had decided he couldn't live without—a home, a garden, neighbours and friends.

Found, too, the partner for his new life, though he hadn't yet offered her the partnership in as many words. But now, glimpsing the flash of a windscreen on the far side of the blue *cala*, he hurried in and washed his hands in the new primrose bathroom, smoothed his sunbleached hair and felt in his slacks pocket for the emerald ring he'd bought in Barcelona two days ago.

But it wasn't Vicky who came up the path a few minutes later. It was Edgar Duardo, his rich neighbour from the big villa across the *cala*, paying his first call. Duardo, hunched and monkey-faced, his great German police dog, alert and formidable, and—something else.

James Silver knew the smell of trouble. If he hadn't he might not have lasted fifteen years in the profession he'd recently left.

Now that he'd retired, though, his guard was lowered and trouble a thing of the past: that's what he'd thought. But there it was, trouble, striding up to his door with Duardo and the dog, Hector.

He went out to meet it.

He didn't like his first close-up of Duardo. Monkey ugliness didn't matter, but he suspected evil behind this ugliness. He said, "Come in, Mr. Duardo," and gave the big dog a friendly nod. "Hello there, Hector."

"Ah, you know Hector." The twisted monkey-face changed remarkably as Duardo dropped a hand on the dog's fine head.

"Everybody round here knows Hector," Silver said. Which was more than could be said of Hector's master. Duardo had owned the white villa in the Barranca Gavarriz for ten years, coming and going frequently, but he hadn't a single friend in the village; whereas Silver, who'd moved into this cottage only six weeks ago, had a circle of friends already. For years he'd dreamed, in a dreary succession of sleeping cars and hotel beds across Europe, of a place like this, longed for it as soldiers long for home. Now it *was* home.

Gesturing Duardo in, he said, "It isn't all fixed yet. Doing it *poco a poco*, you know."

"With some charming assistance," Duardo commented, glancing round the long *entrada* perfunctorily.

Silver disliked hearing Duardo referring to Vicky, even obliquely. He suggested halfheartedly, "Like to see round?"

"Don't bother," Edgar Duardo answered, sinking arrogantly into the only armchair before Silver could invite him. "Let us have a little talk, Mr. Silver."

The smell of trouble was strong. "A little talk?"

"Yes. This is not a social call."

"No? Don't tell me you've come to sell me something!"

Duardo's fat olive fingers caressed his dog's satin ear. "Yes, Mr. Silver, I've come to sell you something. I sell silence."

Impressively at ease, Duardo handed Silver two folded sheets of flimsy paper. "Copies of a letter and enclosure I've sent to my London lawyer. Just as a precaution."

The letter was short:

If I should die before communicating further with you on the subject of the sealed envelope enclosed herewith you are to forward it to the Chief of Police, Berne, Switzerland. Forward it however natural or accidental my death should appear to have been.

The enclosure was in German:

I refer to the murder of the journalist Max Flury in Berne on October 8, 1957. You are seeking a tall, blue-eyed man with a Y-shaped scar on the palm of his right hand. His name is James

Silver and he can be found at Marisol, Cala Gavaritx, Majorca, Spain.

In silence Silver handed back the sheets of onionskin paper, not bothering to conceal the scar on his palm.

Duardo leaned forward. "We know, of course," he said softly, as if he might be overheard, "we know that Flury was not only the popular journalist the Swiss police and public knew. We know he was also a very dangerous spy. A killer, too. It could never be proved that he killed the Italian agent Varesi or the English agent Margaret Hayes; but he did, didn't he?"

"Others, too," Silver said flatly. "I wouldn't have been just his third."

"Oh yes, I expect you did kill him in self-defence," Duardo conceded promptly. "But how could that ever be proved in court? And the witnesses who could back your story are people who never go into witness boxes, as we know. Every member of the organization you served understood that his officers could never come out into the open, not even to save a member from life imprisonment.

"And in this case," Duardo edged his chair forward with a kind of nervous gloating, "in this case a discreet word passed to the Swiss authorities, exposing Flury's undercover career, could help very little. It would not be proof, and Flury was very popular. Besides, what little is known so far of the new group he operated with is so top secret as to rank as virtually unmentionable!"

Frowning at his watch, Silver said coldly, "I haven't much time."

"No more have I." Duardo's tone turned businesslike. "Well, the only other thing you need to know is the price. Ten thousand pounds."

Silver said nothing, but his restraint showed. Ten thousand pounds. Just about the total of the savings he had built up in fifteen years, the capital for the home and the new life he'd dreamed of. That money had freed him from the undercover loneliness and suffocating conspiracy of a secret agent's existence and bought him a house that was already half-way to being a home, with Vicky's help. Vicky . . .

Big trouble. Duardo held a match to the fuse that could blow it all to hell.

"Let's go out to the patio. Stuffy in here."

He gave Duardo no choice, striding out and leaving him to follow. The split cane awning threw wavering lines of sunlight and shade over cool grey tiles, crimson hibiscus and fragrant

climbing stephanotis. He said, his back to Duardo, "I wondered about you. We've all wondered. Only the *contrabandista* Santiago came anywhere near with his guess. He said, 'I met him once in moonlight and I tell you he is one who sucks blood.'"

Duardo only said, "I should like to have the money before the end of the month."

Silver's scarred palm left a stain of sweat on the begonia pot he'd moved into deeper shade, but his voice was steady. "Now listen to me, Duardo. You do your dirty work solo, with an occasional jackal to help your scavenging. But I worked with a big organization. It's true my colleagues couldn't come out into the open to defend me in court; but if you think they wouldn't deal in the dark with somebody who did this to me—well, you don't know so much, after all."

A patient sigh from Duardo. "I was in the business six years myself. I know as well as you that agents seldom know each other and never care a damn."

Silver began watering the potted plants. "I'm trying my luck as a writer now, I suppose you know that. And cashing in on experience, like any other writer. When the true story of Max Flury is published the Swiss authorities won't be so keen to indict somebody who rid them of a dirty traitor."

Duardo sighed again. "Listen, Silver. Even my contact in your organization—and he was one of your superior officers!—refused to pass me a single detail about the new spy ring Flury belonged to. It's *that* secret. Am I to rate your sense of honour and your respect for the Official Secrets Act as lower than his, a pedlar of defence secrets to blackmailers? You would not write a word about Flury for publication and you know it."

Silver's every muscle was taut with the impulse to go to work on the sneering monkey-face; but his brain flashed a warning that relaxed them. This was a crisis action couldn't resolve. The battle was one of wits.

Hector was sniffing at the watering can. "Thirsty, boy?" he asked, and filled a crock with water. The dog lapped gratefully.

Duardo's sneer went. "That's decent of you," he said, adding, as if reasonably, "We all have to live— isn't that right? And some of us have to be pretty ruthless at times. You've had to be ruthless yourself."

"Not for myself," Silver retorted contemptuously. His underestimate of this man's cunning, and the failure of his two weak spur-of-the-moment counterstrokes, sickened him. Never until now had he realized fully how vulnerable loving made a man. That was what gave Duardo his hold, the threat to his home and Vicky and their future. For a moment he saw himself trapped

and beaten, his dream and his future shot down in flames.

But then, through the side window, he saw another flash across the bay, like a huge fish leaping ashore: surely Vicky's windscreen this time. The sight of it brought him whirling round in convulsive desperation, like a hooked fish.

And that was the moment when he realized that he had another card to play.

He patted Hector's fine head and said, "I'm looking for a good dog myself. One of the things I could never have in the business, of course. Not thinking of selling Hector, I suppose?"

Duardo's face twisted in contempt. "Good-bye, Silver. We'll be going now."

"No, seriously," Silver persisted, blocking the doorway. "What sort of money is Hector worth to you? Ten thousand pounds, would you say?"

The reply came scornfully. "You forget, I can get ten thousand pounds for nothing." But the blackmailer's small eyes were held by the cold glint of Silver's blue stare and slowly his face changed. Softly, tensely he demanded, "Are you—threatening Hector?"

Silver said nothing, stared on, let it work.

Duardo's hands clenched into fists. "You touch Hector and—"

"I don't want to touch him," Silver disclaimed. "I'd hate it. I like dogs. I like Hector. I'm just talking about a deal."

A fist unclenched to rest with trembling tenderness on the proud, alert head. Duardo's lips worked and he said, "I had his mother twelve years. The man who touches him will wish he'd never been born. You understand?"

"Perfectly." Silver sank easily into a wrought-iron chair. "It's something I've understood for years. In the job I had—and it's the same in your dirty racket—you have to stay alone, quite alone. Caring about someone makes you too dangerously vulnerable. They can be threatened, you see, and if the threat were made good and you lost them . . . what could you do? Nothing. Nothing that would be any good. So you just don't dare do *anything* that would risk their lives. That's how it is, isn't it, as soon as you forget to keep your heart to yourself."

Duardo's face had quite changed. Scared. Shocked. Human. He said softly, "You'd kill a dog?"

"For a hundred *pesetas* plenty of men in this village would kill Hector. They don't feel the way we do about dogs."

Duardo couldn't deny that. He glared. "You know what would happen to you then."

"Yes, I know." The answer came confidently. "Nothing would happen to me. Because you're not going to lose Hector. You can't afford to risk losing him, Duardo. So we're going to forget this un-neighbourly interview and say *adios*."

Hector barked as Vicky's car pulled up. Duardo's stone-grey eyes rested with desolate affection on him, on the one creature who cared for him, the one creature he cared for. Silver recalled the man's momentary softening when he'd given Hector a drink, and then the way he'd said, "We'll be going now." That was the only *we* Duardo knew, he and Hector.

Vicky came in, radiant as the Mediterranean morning, the new bedroom curtains draped over her arms. When she saw Edgar Duardo's face she said uncertainly, "Oh, I'm interrupting."

He seemed to wake from a bad dream. "No, Miss Marsh. Our business is finished. Quite finished. Come, Hector."

The emerald ring was hidden in James Silver's scarred hand, which was moist and tense again. Vicky threw the buttercup curtains over the armchair as Duardo went out and asked, "Like them?"

With the briefest of glances at them he said, "If you think they're O.K., Vicky—"

"But it's for *you* to say," she objected. "I won't have to live with them."

"That's what I want to talk about," he said.

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When Singapore fell to the Japanese, Sergeant Charles McCormac of the R.A.F. fought on. Captured at last, he was interrogated and brutally treated at the appalling prison camp of Pasir Panjang . . . Safety lay two thousand miles away and hope was slender—but to Sergeant McCormac and his Australian friend Donaldson there were only two choices. Escape or die.

ESCAPE

By CHARLES McCORMAC

THAT night I was obsessed by nightmare fears, dozing fitfully whenever I managed to find a comfortable position, then awakening with a jerk as some new pain cramped my muscles. I resented Donaldson lying untroubled beside me, his mouth open, his snoring echoing loudly into the night.

Long before dawn I was awake, squatting on my haunches, my stomach sore as if it were lined with sandpaper, the sword-cuts round my right eye and mouth oozing yellow water where the flesh lay open. I was terrified of what the day might bring. Would I once again be singled out for "special interrogation"?

Donaldson stirred and blinked at me through sticky, half-closed eyes. He ran his hands through the ginger tangle of his hair.

"Strewth, Mac, what a mess you're in!"

"They didn't provide me with a mirror. I'm sorry I couldn't tidy myself up for you."

"Easy up, cobber," he grunted. "I'm sorry."

I told him about the interrogation. He made little comment, offered little sympathy and gave me little advice. That was the sort of man he was. He believed in action rather than speech or thought.

I rose unsteadily to my feet. My head pounded. I thought I was tough, but at that moment I was pretty near to tears. The guards were starting to line us up for the morning parade.

"Listen, Don, I don't know that I could stand another dose of torture. If they start carting me away this morning, I'll take a chance and run for it. At least I might get a quick death that way."

Don looked at me curiously.

"You're not serious, are you?"

"Sure I am."

"O.K., Mac. Do what you have to do. But remember what'll happen to the rest of us."

I couldn't grasp his meaning.

"What?"

"Well, there's twenty of us in our working-party. If you happened to get away, don't you realize they'd bayonet the rest of us, like they did my coppers?"

I hadn't thought of that.

Here and there the guards pulled out a prisoner for the day's "special treatment." Pigface approached our contingent, reading deliberately through a printed list; he looked straight at me, grinned maliciously and passed us by.

"Thank God for that," I whispered.

Don was beside me as we marched down to the docks. Both of us were thinking, with a new urgency, of the possibility of escape.

After a while, he said quietly:

"Look, Mac. I've got an idea. Suppose the whole lot of our working-party escaped—all twenty of us. The Japs would have nobody left to take reprisals against."

I looked at the men marching alongside us; we were a tough, desperate looking bunch. Could we manage it? And if we did, what were the chances of survival in the jungle?

"Where would we make for?" I whispered. "Malaya, perhaps. Then across to Sumatra."

"Why not Australia?" grinned Don.

"Two thousand miles. One of us might make it, perhaps; God alone knows how."

"I doubt if we'd get the rest of the bunch to try it," Don muttered. "But there's no harm in finding out. I'll sound them when we get down to the docks."

During the day, choosing his time carefully when the guards weren't watching, Don edged his way from man to man. I sounded one or two myself, keeping a wary eye on the guard who was watching my end of the working-party. He was a swarthy fellow; fat, round-faced and in his early forties. He didn't look like a Japanese, and it came to me suddenly that he might well be a Portuguese Eurasian. I also had the feeling that I had seen

him somewhere before. Anyhow, his behaviour was distinctly odd. Whenever the other guards approached he would turn to us and snarl and bellow. But when they turned their backs, he would whisper to us in a sympathetic, friendly manner and tell us to ease up while the others were not looking.

I didn't trust him and waited until he was out of the way before enlisting support for our proposed escape. But oddly enough he didn't leave me very often; he kept on glancing at me, quizzically. I couldn't make him out.

As we were marching back to camp that evening, I told Don about him.

"Ruddy stool-pigeon, I expect," he said. "We'd better watch our step there."

"What do the others think about escape?"

"They don't like the idea much. Three or four were game to try anything; a few others were willing to join up if we had a decent plan; but the rest were dead against it."

We entered the cage at Pasir Panjang that night with more than usual weariness. I cannot remember having ever been so completely exhausted, and I was depressed at the lack of enthusiasm for a mass escape.

And then came the sort of opportunity I had been desperately hoping for.

Five days after my interrogation we were working as usual on the docks when the fat Eurasian came up to me.

"Don't stop working," he muttered. "Don't let the guards see you talking to me."

"O.K." I went on piling up the stones, bricks and sludge.

"You've been tortured, haven't you?" he asked softly.

"Yes; and I'm expecting more."

"Why don't you try and get away?"

I looked at him curiously. How far, I wondered, could I trust this man? I decided to take a chance.

"I've thought of it, of course."

Rodriguez, for that was his name, leaned closer to me. "Then be quick. I tell you, you won't live long at Pasir Panjang. Most of you here are held as being specially dangerous. One by one you'll die."

Now I was learning something. Rodriguez hesitated.

"I have a brother in Malaya. Up in the hills near Kuala Lipis. He's with the guerrillas. I could fix a boat for you to cross the Straits. Perhaps you could join up with them."

"How much do you want for helping us? I have no money."

Rodriguez looked away.

"I ask no payment. The Japanese raped my daughter."

Back in camp that evening, Don and I put our heads together. We thrashed out every possible way of escape.

The solution came to me suddenly.

"Listen, Don. There's no roll-call in the camp. To the Japs our working-party consists simply of seventeen Europeans and three Asiatics. The Japs aren't interested in names. All they worry about is numbers. Six of our men won't join in; all we need do is go round the rest of the prisoners tonight, find six chaps willing to come in with us and swap them for the six who won't."

Don smiled slowly and then smacked his fist with the other palm. "You've got it, Mac," he said.

It was as simple as that. By the cold light of the arc-lights, we crawled from one party of men to another and quickly found six who were keen to make the attempt. The actual method of the escape was left to Don and me to work out, though it was agreed that we would all stick together, and once we had got away from the camp, make for Rodriguez's boat and thence over to the mainland to join the guerrillas. None of the Asiatics could be trusted to join in so the escape was planned for the seventeen Europeans only.

The first step was to keep Rodriguez informed of our intentions. I told him that the whole working-party, including the six new men (whom he hadn't noticed until I pointed them out), had decided to attempt an escape.

He did not look too happy.

"How do you propose to escape?" he asked rather fearfully.

"That will come later. But we'll definitely need your boat. You won't let us down, will you?"

His mouth took a firmer line.

"No."

"All right, then. I'll tell you when we're set."

He fidgeted uncomfortably.

"You can't do it during the day, while I am in charge of the party. I have a wife and six children to think of. You'll have to do it at night. Then suspicion won't fall on me. Get away tomorrow night, come to my house at Paya Lebar and I'll take you to the boat. Do you know Paya Lebar?"

I said I did. It was a tiny village a couple of miles from Seletar airfield on the Serangoon Road, and about twelve miles from the compound at Pasir Panjang.

"How will I recognize your house?"

He gave me full details of how to find it.

That evening at Pasir Panjang Don and I studied the gate into

the camp. It was only a flimsy affair—a nine-foot bamboo bar entwined with barbed wire which was lifted up by the sentries whenever we entered or marched out. A few yards outside the compound, to the left of the gate, was an atap hut used as the guard-house. To the right of the entrance was another atap hut, used, we suspected, as a power-house or control hut; here, obviously, was the main switchgear for the arc-lamps. Round the camp, which was of course patrolled by sentries, was the electric wiring that fed the arc-lamps and was connected at intervals by junction-boxes. Between us and that heavy flex lay the coils of barbed wire.

I stared at the electric flex and the junction-boxes, and a very simple plan began to take shape in my mind.

I have abnormally long arms. If only I could stretch through the barbed wire, I might be able to pull the leads out of a junction-box and so disconnect the circuit. The compound would be plunged into darkness; in the confusion the seventeen of us could charge the gate and make a dash for it.

I explained my idea to Don.

"That's it, Mac. You've got it. If only you can reach through to a junction-box."

Next morning the parade took place as usual. We were counted and, by the grace of God, none of us was held back for interrogation. We marched, in the coolness of early morning, down to the docks. All of us were nervously excited.

Down there, we told Rodriguez.

"I'll be expecting you tonight then," he quavered. And the trepidation in his voice made us more nervous still.

Every ordeal must, I suppose, end some time, and when at long last we were paraded again for the march back to Pasir Panjang each of us had managed to find and conceal some sort of weapon. I had a thick club-shaped piece of iron-wood. Don had a lump of lead and three to four feet of thin rope, which he knotted to the heavy metal, making a primitive bolo. It was a fearsome arsenal hidden that evening under our shirts and shorts, but the guards spotted nothing.

Back in camp we wasted no time; each man had his own part to play and knew exactly what to do. Alone or in couples, the seventeen of us, laughing and chattering, infiltrated towards the gate. This manœuvring went on for over half an hour, by which time Don and I and two others had edged towards the barbed wire to where the nearest junction-box was positioned. My heart was pounding deep inside me like the beat of a ship's engine. I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

It was getting dark now. In only a few minutes the Japanese

sentry would be crossing over from the guard-house to the atap hut where the switchgear and generator were.

I looked carefully around me, and saw some of our party eyeing me expectantly. Two guards passed on their routine patrol round the perimeter. It would be six and a half minutes before they completed the circuit. I took a deep breath.

Taking my time, I flattened out on the earth, then, lying at full stretch, started to slither carefully towards the coils of wire. Don was watching the disappearing guards.

"Coast is clear, Mac," he muttered.

He pressed backwards on to the first coil, and I heard his hissing intake of breath as he heaved against the taut wire. I slipped my left arm over a spiral of barbs, and eased my head through the first coil. My fingers, stretched out, were still a foot from the junction-box. The barbs were digging into my left shoulder and blood trickled down my face as the sharp barbs tore through hair and skin.

"Not quite," I panted. "Press back as hard as you can."

Don grunted and I felt the wire tightening under the weight of his body. I squirmed forward with the wire, inch by inch, until my fingers touched the electric cables.

"Buck up, Mac," panted Don. "The guards are coming back. They're only fifty yards off."

I gritted my teeth and jerked the cable sideways. The barbs bit deep into my shoulder and neck; but the strands, thank God, were loose in my hand.

"That's it, Don."

Some two or three yards inside the wire we half-rose and squatted on our haunches. The sentries ambled by, glanced at us curiously but seemed to notice nothing amiss.

The others were in scattered groups now on either side of the gate, silent, watching and waiting. Waiting for the Jap soldier to appear from the guard-hut and cross to the power-house. It can only have been a couple of minutes before we saw him strutting cockily across, but to each of us the minutes seemed like hours.

He stared at us, then disappeared into the power-house. Almost as one man, in the gathering darkness, we started to edge towards the gate. We were none of us prepared for what happened next. We heard a generator start up, then a sudden, blinding flash lit up the hut, silhouetting its broken supports, its windows and its disintegrating walls. The sharp crack of an explosion echoed across the compound. The roof caved in and burst into flames.

"Now!" shouted Don, and we tore towards the gate. Men

shrieked in pain as the vicious coils of wire lacerated their hands, but we lifted the bamboo bar from out of its socket and flung the gate up and over. At the same moment a handful of Japanese rushed out of the guard-hut. For a second they wavered, then came the staccato crackle of tommy-guns, ending abruptly as we threw ourselves on them. I was lucky. I got Pigface.

I saw him tearing towards me, his teeth bared, his bayonet swinging back; with all my strength I smashed the lump of wood down and on to his face. As he dropped, I lashed at him again. Then I dropped my club, grabbed his bayonet and sprinted for the rubber-trees. Behind me, the outline of struggling men stood out sharply against the glare of the burning hut. No going back, we had said. I tore on. I passed Donaldson; he was struggling and jerking at what looked like a dead body.

"Come on, Don!" I yelled at him. Behind us machine-guns were chattering angrily. I was running now through tangled undergrowth, dodging quickly from one tree to another. Then I was in the open, and felt the sharp blades of lalang grass whipping against my legs. On and on I rushed, my lungs heaving like bellows, until at last I could run no further. I slowed down to a walk. But already someone was catching up with me. I could hear him crashing his way through the rubber plantation. It was Don.

"All right, Mac?" he panted.

"Uh, uh." I stopped, gasping for breath.

"Don't wait, for God's sake."

We went on, zigzagging, whenever we were able, sometimes running, sometimes trotting, sometimes stumbling. Behind us the sounds of fighting grew fainter and finally died away. Both of us were breathing heavily and raspily. But we were exultant.

"Why on earth were you hanging about outside the gate?" I panted, as we slowed down to a walk.

"Fatarse had my bolo."

"Good Lord, man! Why ever did you stop for that?"

"I dunno. The ball had stuck in his head and wouldn't come out. I left it in the end and took his bayonet."

Suddenly Don laughed. "Mac, boy, we're out! Do you realize it? We're out! We're free men!"

"We'd better turn off to the right," I told Don. "Somewhere here we ought to hit the Bukit Timor Road."

Partly by luck and partly by judgment, my navigation was dead accurate. After about an hour we left the Bukit Timor Road, and struck into a wide belt of rubber-trees which I knew stretched and sprawled for several miles almost up to Paya Lebar.

It was close on midnight when we approached the village. We moved cautiously through a maze of small intersecting tracks. Then out of the darkness loomed the great tree Rodriguez had said was less than fifty yards from his house; the moment we spotted it our feeling of tension increased.

"Now what?" asked Don. "Do we knock Rodriguez up or wait a bit for the others?"

"Better wait a bit," I advised.

So we lay side by side, stretched out on the grass by the huge bole of the tree, both of us trembling and perspiring. After about twenty minutes, we heard a rustling in the trees behind us; we lay quite still, watching and listening. The noises grew more distinct—the snapping of twigs, the soft pad of running feet, then from beneath the heavy leaves emerged two crouched, bedraggled figures. Another pair had reached the rendezvous.

We waited for nearly an hour. After ten minutes three more arrived; then a chap on his own; then another couple, and another, until at last there were twelve of us.

"Still five short," observed a tall young Scot.

We held a council of war. "I reckon we've waited long enough," I said.

"Sure," agreed Don. "We'll stay under cover; you call on friend Rodriguez."

I slowly made my way, crouching low, towards Rodriguez's house. There was a door almost fronting on to the track, and a pale light streamed from the single open window. I knocked softly. There was no reply. I knocked again. Then the door opened a few inches, and Rodriguez, his face round and shiny, eyebrows raised and forehead wrinkled, peered out apprehensively.

"It's me, McCormac."

He opened the door just wide enough to let me through, then closed it quickly.

"How many got away?"

"Seventeen broke camp, but only twelve are here so far."

He looked at me unhappily. "Twelve's a lot for the boat."

"We can cross in relays. Where exactly is it?"

"Kranji Point, three hundred yards west of the Causeway."

"Good God, man, that's miles away!"

Rodriguez nodded. I saw the perspiration soaking through his singlet and his crumpled, threadbare slacks. He shifted uneasily. "Yes, I know. That's the trouble."

There was a pause—an uncomfortable pause. He seemed to make up his mind quite suddenly.

"I can't go with you. I can't risk my family. You'll have to fend for yourselves."

I knew as well as he did the sort of reprisals his family might expect.

"Can we use your boat?"

"Sure you can—don't worry about that. Do you know how to get there?"

I smiled and patted his wet, podgy shoulder. "We'll be all right, and thanks for all you've done." I turned towards the door, but he stopped me and pushed into my hand a wad of paper money—a thickish roll of Japanese dollars.

"Good luck," he whispered.

I walked back to the tree, and the others materialized out of the undergrowth. I found that another three escapers had arrived safely. We were still two short.

We waited about half an hour but the last two never came.

We decided to make our way to the Causeway in groups of twos and threes, with about twenty yards between each group. Don and I were to lead the way, for I was in familiar territory and knew the roads and the best points at which to cross them. We were to regroup on the far side of the Naval Base Road, which led to the Causeway. The latter was the danger spot and was certain to be well patrolled and guarded.

At last we reached the Naval Base Road, and saw at the bottom of it the twinkling lights of the Causeway over the Johore Straits. On the other side were the mainland, the hills, the jungle, the guerrillas. Our chance of freedom. Near the Causeway Don and I stopped among the twisted trunks and roots of the mangroves, waiting for the rest of the party, and it was agreed that if we got across the Straits we would again split into pairs and make our way independently towards the Kuala Lipis hills.

Once assembled we made a compact group, and bent low from the hips, we edged slowly forward across the mud-flats towards the water, which we could hear lapping against the shore. The mud-flats were slippery and quite devoid of cover. But there, thank God, drawn a little above the water's edge, was not one boat but two.

"Good old Rodriguez!" muttered a Welshman behind me.

"Shut up, you fool!" snapped Don.

Instantly all of us stiffened and froze motionless. Only ten yards away, dead in front of us, a number of dark figures were walking purposefully towards the boats. A Japanese patrol. Had we stood still and remained quiet, we might perhaps have got away with it. But from the rear of our party came a frightened yell.

"Japs."

There were startled orders from the shadowy figures ahead, then the biting orange flashes of point-blank rifle-fire. We had only one chance. Springing forward as one man, we rushed the patrol. Clubs and bayonets wielded by desperate men are terrible weapons. In a second we were among them, and a slithering mass of bodies fought savagely beside the quietly lapping water. I saw the white gleam of a Jap's teeth, and like a maniac slashed my bayonet at his face. Together we dropped on to the mud and I felt him squirming beneath me, his nails tearing into my thighs. I changed my grip on the bayonet and using it like a dagger, stabbed it again and again into the writhing body clawing round my legs.

As suddenly as it had started, the fight was over. And seven of our party lay dead or dying on the wet, shining mud.

"Come on," someone muttered. "In a minute the swine will be swarming out."

There was just room for the eight of us in one boat, and this we pushed and shoved towards the water. It slid smoothly over the slime and mud and once it was afloat, we tumbled in. The Welshman found a paddle lying in the bottom and with it he pushed off from the shore. He heaved hard, and the rest of us dragged our hands deeply through the water. Slowly—painfully slowly—we moved into the Strait.

I looked round for oars or sail, but apart from the solitary paddle and a short stump of mast the bottom of the boat was almost empty. We tried paddling with our hands, using the paddle as a rudder, but seemed to make very little progress.

"Thank heaven it's dark," growled Don.

But it was not dark for long. Suddenly from the Causeway a searchlight flashed out brilliantly. There was no escaping it. It was swinging in our direction. "Down!" I hissed sharply.

Huddled on the floorboards below the level of the gunwale, we lay perfectly still. Suddenly the boat floated into light; light was all round us; and then it was dark again as the beam passed on.

"Don't move," muttered Don. "It'll be back."

It was. Again the pale golden light flooded over the boat; this time the beam steadied and remained trained on us. Every minute we expected to hear the rattle of machine-gun fire or the engine of an approaching launch. But after what seemed like hours, the light moved on and the boat was dark again.

Don peered over the gunwale. "Keep down, chaps," he ordered sharply.

There we lay, motionless and terrified, each of us feeling the adjacent bodies panting in and out, in and out.

"It's coming back again," he grunted. "Keep right down."

The searchlight played around us, like a cat uncertain whether the mouse is dead; then suddenly it cut off. As, with grunts and groans, we pulled ourselves up from our cramped positions, I saw that the scattered lights on the Causeway were much further away. We must have moved round with the current, and were now drifting away from it, westwards, out to sea.

"Not much point in trying to paddle," I said. "There's a five-knot tide here and it's taking us just about in the right direction."

It was reassuring to see the lights of the Causeway fading further into the distance, away into the milky haze of the horizon. All the same we were heading out to sea, out into the broad Strait of Malacca. I hoped that the tide would sweep us up the Malay Peninsula, and that we would be able to paddle ourselves ashore into the mangrove swamps along the west coast of Malaya.

It was cold in the boat and none of us was wearing more than a tattered shirt, shorts and shoes. Our limbs were aching after the desperate rush across the island from Pasir Panjang to the Causeway. Our bodies weren't used to that sort of exertion. My own legs were still smarting from the clawing scratches of the Japanese soldier, and congealed blood had thickened where the barbed wire had cut into my head and shoulders. We were a motley looking crew, huddled closely together for warmth on the floorboards of the dilapidated twelve-foot boat. The Welshman was singing softly.

I crawled on hands and knees round the boat, taking stock of our few provisions. Up in the bows I came across a small drum of water, nearly full, also a few strips of dried fish and some rotten fruit. We shared the food round and half the water. There wasn't much for each man, but the water was like nectar.

The sun rose cold, fresh and pink, its rays shafting flatly across the sea. Over to the east, several miles distant, was a thin pencil of land. We had drifted far.

We took turns on the paddle, using our strength economically in an attempt to head the boat north-east towards the land. We made little progress. Then we tried paddling in unison with our hands; we moved with the *élan* of a water-flea crossing the Pacific. After an hour we gave it up.

"There's a slight breeze, Don," I said. "Let's tie our shirts together and try to rig up a sail."

We were just starting to peel them off when Don drew his breath in sharply.

"Hold it!" he snapped.

He pointed to the east and I followed the line of his finger towards the distant strip of land. There, low on the horizon, were two dots in the clear morning sky, becoming rapidly larger. Presently we heard the low hum of engines. Aircraft.

"Recognize 'em, Mac?"

"Not yet. They're fighters, I think."

The planes were low over the water and flying directly towards us. A quarter of a mile away they seemed to be heading to the north of us; then one banked sharply towards us, followed immediately by the other.

"Look out!" I yelled. "They're Zeros."

"Overboard!" shouted Don. And he dived over the gunwale.

In no time I was in beside him, and I remember my surprise at finding the water so warm. Three more of us jumped into the sea, but the others stayed crouched low in the bottom of the boat, their eyes following the aircraft as if hypnotized. The Zeros roared in only a few feet above us, then they climbed sharply until they were again mere specks in the sky. Then they turned in for the kill, sweeping down on the boat in a long shallow dive, their throttles wide open, little darts of flame spouting from the cannon at either wing-root. Those still in the boat tumbled over the side, one of them screaming, "Watch out for sharks!"

I swam away fast, and as my ears filled with the roar of the fighters, took a deep lungful of air and dived under the water with all the power I could muster. I surfaced like a fish thrown up by an under-water explosion. Behind me, the sea was churned up by cannon-shells and the boat was upside down.

"Look out, here they come again!" It was—thank God—an Australian voice: Don's. I dived again. Twice more the Zeros, cannon and machine-guns blazing, swept down on the boat; then they circled low over the water. Finally they climbed high into the western sky and headed away up the Malacca Strait.

I made sure they were out of sight before I swam back to the shell-holed keel of the boat, which was upside-down but still floating. Don reached it just before me, and we clung on breathlessly, looking round at the foam-flecked waves for the other six. Only two heads appeared; and only two men, gasping for air, splashed their way over to my side of the keel and sought a grip on the smooth, slippery wood.

"Let's turn it over," Don panted, and he swam over to our side.

The four of us trod water and heaved together until the boat rolled sluggishly over, bringing a mass of water inside it, so that the gunwale was only just above the surface. We were scared of sharks, and pulling ourselves into the boat, started to bale out furiously with our hands.

There was no sign of the others. Don and I watched anxiously for them, but the sea, apart from our riddled boat and the distant haze of land, was empty.

I caught Don's eye.

"Sharks or bullets," I said.

So now we were four. Four out of seventeen.

But we were free, and whatever lay ahead of us could not match what we had suffered at Pasir Panjang. And suddenly I felt that despite our present plight we were going to make it.

This episode is taken from Charles McCormac's story of his capture and escape, in his book "You'll Die in Singapore" published by Robert Hale.



A NEW MARGERY ALLINGHAM !

MISS ALLINGHAM and her artist-journalist husband P. Youngman Carter live in a ravishing brick William-and-Mary house. Three rooms are devoted to writing: the third and smallest, halfway up a wall, is approached by a removable

ladder like a drawbridge. This sanctuary is where most of the work gets done.

Hide My Eyes, her new novel which **SUSPENSE** starts this month, is likened by its author to her other famous thriller, *Tiger in the Smoke*. Both books, set in London, are so contrived that the reader, though aware of what the villain is up to, is helplessly uncertain as to what will happen next !

Margery Allingham herself prefers *Hide My Eyes* to the *Tiger*—We agree whole-heartedly. Polly is an enchanting old duck, and Gerry a creation to give anyone the cold grue . . . We won't keep you from them any longer.

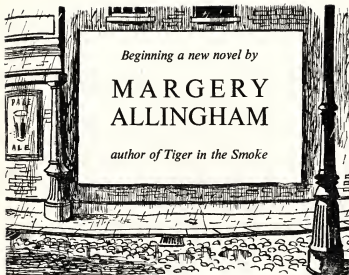
Now turn over to page 132



HIDE MY EYES

THE arrival of the bus was timed to perfection. Nobody of the slightest importance saw it at all. Commissioner George Wardle had just stepped down into the staff room of The Porch for his mid-evening pint and sausage and so was not on duty outside the famous old restaurant which faces the Duke of Grafton's Theatre and the dark entrance to Goff's Place which runs down beside it.

The bus came trundling along from the eastern end of the Avenue, a small, closed single-decker of the type still used in remote country districts. It was lit from within by a single low-powered bulb and only the passengers on the front seat were visible from the street. These were in tune with the vehicle, two cosy figures, plump and elderly, in decent, out-of-town finery. The man wore a hard hat above his rounded beard, and his wife—for one could not imagine that he was out with any other woman—wore beads on her out-of-date bonnet and a rug wrapped round her stiff shoulders. They were not talking but dozing, as the old do, and looked warm and protected and out of the wet.



The driver swung the bus neatly into the Goff's Place entry and turned it in the tiny cobbled space behind the theatre. For the past five hundred weekdays at this time in the evening the cul de sac had been crammed with such country coaches, up from the villages with parties to see the latest domestic musical. But tonight the building was dark. The piece had finished its run and spring-cleaning was not due to begin for another twenty-four hours.

The driver parked the country bus with remarkable care. It took him some little time to get his clumsy vehicle exactly into the position he desired, with the rear side against the Goff's Place telephone booth, screening it entirely from the sight of the Avenue.

With this lighted kiosk obscured, the whole area had become appreciably darker and the driver was only just discernible in the streaming gloom as he sprang out of his seat, his black oilskins flickering below the white plastic top of his peaked cap. Carrying a small leather attaché case, he turned into the booth.

In the coach the old people did not move. They sat close together in the warm, dozing, while the rain poured over the tiny window beside them like a brook over a boulder.

In the telephone booth the driver settled himself with his back against the wall, wedged his case on a shelf under the instrument, and felt in his pocket. His peaked cap cast a shadow dark as an eye mask over the upper part of his face, but the plane of his thin cheek and strong jaw and neck muscles caught the light. He was smiling as he stretched out a gaunt hand for the instrument.

He inserted four coins, dialled a number, and then slid down in the booth so that he could peer up through the rainy dark at the back of the house directly in front of him. For thirty seconds he listened to the number ringing out and then, high up in the building, a pale oblong of yellow light sprang into existence. He pressed the A button immediately so that as soon as he heard his caller he was able to speak without any tell-tale click betraying that he was in a public box. "Hullo, is that you, Lew? You're still there, are you? Can I come round?"

The voice, pleasant and schooled as an actor's, was unexpected, the undertone of excitement transmuted into confidence.

"Come round? Of course you can come round. You'd better. I'm waiting, aren't I?"

The new voice was harsh and possessed a curious muddy quality, but in its own way it was honest enough.

The man in the peaked cap laughed. "Cheer up," he said, "your reward is on the way. You can send John down to get the door open if he's still there. I'll be with you in five minutes."

"John's gone home. I'm here alone and I'm waiting for you here till midnight as I said I would. After that you've got to take the consequences. I told you and I meant it."

In the booth the man's bunched jaw muscles hardened but the pleasant disingenuous voice remained soothing.

"Relax. You've got a pleasant shock coming to you. I've got the money, every farthing of it." He was silent for a moment. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes."

"I wondered. Aren't you pleased?"

"I'm pleased that we should both be saved a lot of trouble." There was a grudging pause and then, as curiosity got the better of him, "The old gentleman paid up to save you, did he?"

"He did. Not willingly nor without comment exactly. However, pay he did. You didn't believe he existed, did you?"

"What I believe don't matter. You get out here with the money. Where are you?"

"St. James's, in the old man's club. I'll be seeing you."

He hung up and slid down in the booth again to watch the lighted window. After a moment a shadow appeared across it and the blind descended. The man in the telephone booth snapped open the catch of the leather case before him and drew out a small squat gun, which he passed through the side-slit in his oilskin into the safety of his jacket within. He then opened the case wide, revealing that it contained nothing but a dark felt hat of good quality and a pair of clean pigskin gloves. He exchanged these for his peaked cap and gauntlets and became at once a different-looking person. The long black oiled coat ceased to be part of a uniform and became an ordinary protection which any man might wear against the rain, and, with the removal of the cap, his eyes and forehead came out of their mask of shadow.

He looked thirty or a very few years older, good-looking in a

conventional way, his features regular and his round eyes set wide apart. Only the heavy muscles at the corners of his jaw, and the unusual thickness of his neck, were not in the accepted fashionable picture. The most outstanding thing about him was an impression of urgency that was apparent in every line of his body.

He slid out of the red kiosk, the gun in his gloved hand inside his jacket pocket, passed round behind the bus, empty save for the old people who had not moved, and came down the narrow lane into the sign-lit brightness of the Avenue. It was still pouring, and the pavements were almost empty as he glanced briefly up the street. The next moment he halted abruptly but recovered himself and, pulling his slicker collar round his chin, he stepped under the canopy of the theatre. Directly between himself and the entrance to Deban Street there was a bus stop, and beneath it stood an elderly woman, waiting patiently in the downpour.

She stood still, looking square and solid in a green mackintosh cape, dark now in patches where the rain had soaked her shoulders.

If he passed her he must run the risk of her seeing him and recognizing his back, just as he had hers. He decided against risking it, and turned the other way, back across the entrance to Goff's Place and on to Morbihan Street where he found, as he had hoped, a taxi-rank. There was one cab left on it and, keeping his face turned away from the light, he spoke to the driver.

"There's an old girl standing at the bus stop just round the corner here, guv," he said pleasantly. "She lives just off the Barrow Road. At the moment she's catching pneumonia because she thinks that it's a crime to take a taxi just for herself. Here is ten bob. Will you go and take her home?"

The driver laughed. He took the crumpled note and started his engine. "Don't they make you tired?" he said, referring to womenkind in general. "Cruel to themselves half the time. Shall I tell her your name? She's sure to want to know."

The man in the oilskin coat hesitated with what appeared to be natural modesty. "Oh, I don't think so," he said at last. "It might embarrass her. Tell her one of her old pals."

The old cab shuddered and sprang forward and the man on foot stepped back into the shadow of a doorway. He counted two hundred slowly before walking out into the rain again. This time the Avenue was safe, and the bus stop deserted.

Gun in hand, head bent against the rain, he passed unnoticed down the lighted way, and turned into Deban Street.

Just about eight months after the incident the newspapers had christened "The Goff Place Mystery," which had made a nine-days wonder in the Press, Mr. Albert Campion closed the door of Chief Superintendent Yeo's room and walked up two flights of stairs to tap on one which belonged to the newest Superintendent, Charles Luke.

Mr. Campion was a tall, thin man in his early fifties, with fair hair, a pale face, and large spectacles, who had cultivated the

gentle art of unobtrusiveness until even his worst enemies were apt to overlook him until it was too late. He and the present Assistant Commissioner, Crime, Mr. Stanislaus Oates, had been hunting-companions in the days when Oates was an Inspector C.I.D.; and since then Yeo, who was following Oates's footsteps, and many other eminent senior men in the service were content to consider him a friend, an expert witness and, at times, a very valuable guide into little-known territory.

He knocked and was admitted by a clerk who withdrew as the Superintendent, hand outstretched, came across the room.

Mr. Campion thought he had never seen the man in such tremendous form. Luke was a magnificent specimen who looked a little less than his six feet because of the weight of his muscles. He had a live, dark face under black hair which curled tightly to his scalp. Nervous energy radiated from him, and his narrow eyes under peaked brows were shrewd and amused.

"Hallo! Just the man I was hoping to see!" he said with disconcerting enthusiasm. "I was wondering if I could get hold of you. I'm on to something pretty hot. I'm certain of it, but at the moment it's just a little bit on the vague side."

He turned to a chart which hung on the wall behind him, and Mr. Campion saw that it was a large-scale street map of a part of the Metropolitan Police District in west London where Charlie Luke had served as a Divisional Detective Inspector for several adventurous years. It sported a crop of coloured flags as on a battle map. The centre of the chart was an irregular patch, coloured green to indicate an open space, which lay in the angle made by the junction of two traffic ways, Edge Street running south to the Park and the long Barrow Road going west. He leaned forward to read the large print across the space.

"Garden Green," Campion said aloud. "I don't know it. I thought it was Goff's Place you were still worrying about."

Luke cocked an eye at him. "Huh," he said, "so I am." He perched himself on the edge of the desk and looked, as Campion had so often seen him, like some huge cat, lithe and intent. "Goff's Place and the corpse who went by bus. Listen to me."

It was one of Charlie Luke's more engaging peculiarities that he amplified all his stories with a remarkable pantomimic sideshow. Now he hunched himself, drew his lips over his teeth to suggest age, and altered the shape of his nose by clapping his fist over it.

"Poor old Lew," he said. "A decent, straight little chap with more patience than sense until the end of it was reached of course, when he was firm as a moneylender has to be. He had a pawnshop in Deban Street and when he shut it in the evening he used to nip upstairs to his office and get out his ledgers on the usury lark." He paused and fixed his visitor with a baleful eye. "Someone took him for a ride, and made a mess of his office first. There was blood all over the floor, at least half a dozen vital books were missing and the trail led down the stairs at the back to a door which opened into Goff's Place and no one has seen little Lew since."

Mr. Campion nodded. "I remember it," he said. "It was a very wet night and nobody thought it curious that a country bus should be waiting in the yard at a time when there was no performance on at the Duke of Grafton's. The police decided the body must have been taken away in the bus."

"The police had to decide something," said Luke bitterly. "Old Lew *must* have gone in the bus, but in that case what was the explanation of the two old dears who were already sitting in it? That was the item which shook me. Who were they? What happened to them? Why did they keep silent and how sound were they sleeping?"

Mr. Campion's pale eyes grew thoughtful behind his spectacles.

"Ah yes," he said at last. "The old man with the round beard and the old lady with the beads in her bonnet who were dozing on the front seat. Some witness described them, I fancy."

"Five people came forward to swear that they'd glanced into Goff's Place that night between nine-forty and ten-five and had seen the bus waiting there. They all remembered seeing the old folk. Even the waiter who passed the mouth of the yard when the bus driver was actually climbing into his seat didn't glance at him twice but could paint a picture of the passengers in oils. He was the chap who swore he'd seen them before."

"Had he, by George? That must have been useful!"

"I thought so." The new Superintendent was inclined to be offhand. "The chap wasn't specific. He thought he'd seen them in Edge Street and he was certain it was through glass. He reckoned they must have been sitting in a tea-shop and he'd seen them through the window as he passed by." He hesitated. "I warn you, my evidence gets thinner still as I go on. That blue flag on the corner there marks the branch of Cuppages, the cheap outfitters where this was bought in a sale." He dragged open a drawer, drew out a thick brown envelope, and took out a glove cut for a man's left hand in imitation hogskin, and nearly new.

"This is the glove left behind in the Church Row shooting."

"My dear fellow, I wouldn't dream of arguing with you, but the Church Row shooting happened quite three years ago."

"Just about." Luke spoke cheerfully. "It was about this time, October. The Goff Place business was last February."

"A gap of two years and four months?" Mr. Campion's expression was very dubious.

Luke returned to his map. "Well, I wondered if it was all gap. See that pink marker half way down Fairey Street, just behind Cuppages? That's a small jeweller's. Belongs to an old boy called Tobias. I've known him for years. Not long ago a young woman passed by his window and went up in the air. She'd seen this in his cheap tray." He brought out a small box containing a gold ring decorated with ivy leaves which he passed to his visitor. "She'd recognized it as belonging to her auntie, and she was excited about finding it because her auntie and uncle completely vanished two years and three months ago."

Mr. Campion sat looking at the Superintendent with misleading innocence. "I trust you don't suggest that the aunt and uncle travelled by bus, Charles?"

"No," said Luke. "No one knows *how* they travelled, or even if they travelled. They sold up their house, and collected all their money, and got on a train for London without a word of explanation to anyone, except that the old lady, in writing to her niece to thank her for a white plastic handbag which she'd sent her for her birthday, had mentioned that they'd met a very nice young man who had told Uncle wonderful things about Johannesburg, and how suitable the handbag would be if ever they went. That was all. Auntie never wrote again."

He paused and thrust his jaw out with sudden savagery. "We can't find a whisper of them anywhere, except that Auntie's ring which never left her finger turned up right in the middle of the area in which I'm interested."

Mr. Campion looked at the ring. It was not valuable but the design was unusual and rather beautiful.

"Yes," he said at last. "What a beastly little tale. What does Tobias say?"

"So little he must be telling the truth." Luke sighed gustily. "He can't remember when the ring came in. He says it must have come in with a parcel of second-hand stuff." Dropping the ring in its box, he placed the package on top of the glove.

"What about the last flag?" Campion inquired. "The one in the middle of the green."

Returning to the drawer once more, Luke produced a large lizard-skin letter-case of very good quality. "In April this year a kid picked this up from the grass in Garden Green. He gave it to a bobby and it turned out to be just the thing the Kent police were looking for. It belonged to a car salesman whose body had been found in his coupé at the bottom of a chalk-pit on the Folkestone-London road. Skidmarks on the surface suggested he'd been forced off the road by another car. It was discovered that he'd been carrying all of seven hundred pounds on him when he set out from the coast. When he was found he had a pocketful of loose change but no notecase. His family identified this."

He let his mouth widen into a ferocious grin and dropped the leather folder on the glove and the ring. "There you are," he said, "it doesn't mean much but how good it looks!"

Mr. Campion walked over to have a closer look at the chart.

"You haven't a scrap of evidence of any kind, have you?" he murmured absently. "You'd be more convincing with a crystal ball. I don't know Garden Green. What is it like?"

"Sad." Luke drooped, impersonating a willow perhaps. "Used to be a graveyard. A hoarding separates it from the Barrow Road, and round the back there are the usual little houses—beautiful porches, horrible plumbing. It's a quiet district. Not a slum. This chap I have in mind doesn't *live* there, you know."

There was something so convinced and familiar in his tone

that Mr. Campion was startled. The Superintendent laughed.

"I've got him under my skin good and proper, haven't I? I worry about him you know. He didn't make anything out of the Church Row shooting, so I figure he had to catch up on Auntie and Uncle. He got a few hundred quid from them, but not enough to square the moneylender who must have been pressing. So he attended to that little problem but he didn't touch much cash, if any, in Deban Street and therefore, a couple of months later, he gave his mind to the car salesman. I don't know how long that drop of lolly would last, because I don't know what his debts were."

"This is pure fiction," said Mr. Campion reproachfully. "Why watch Garden Green if he doesn't live there?"

"Because he's treating it as a hide. You can't tell what he's got out there—someone or something that gives him an entirely false sense of security. He goes there when he wants to leave himself behind. I know his state of mind about that place: he thinks he's almost *invisible* there and that things he takes from there or chucks away couldn't ever be traced to him." His quick dark eyes met Campion's. "It's an old idea—sanctuary they call it."

Mr. Campion shivered. He did not know why. "You make it very convincing, Charles," he said at last.

Luke thrust his hands in his pockets and began to play with the coins there. "This chap has a brain and he's got nerve. He's not neurotic. He's perfectly sane, he's merciless as a snake, and he's careful—doesn't like witnesses or corpses left around."

Mr. Campion had heard white hunters describing game they were after with the same almost loving interest.

"You see him as simply out for money, do you?" he inquired.

"Oh yes, and not necessarily big money. He's a crook. He makes a living by taking all he needs from other people. The really unusual thing about him is that he kills, quite coldly, when it's the safest thing to do."

He swept the exhibits back into their drawer again. "He's the enemy," he said. "My enemy. Professional *and* natural, and I tell you I'm as certain as if I was reading it on my tombstone, either I'm going to get him or he's going to get me."

Early in the day on which Mr. Campion went to visit Superintendent Luke, Garden Green achieved a beauty which was not normally its outstanding characteristic. Sunlight, yellow and crystal in the mist, glowed through the wet black branches of the plane trees. A narrow path ran round the green. At the furthest loop was a single wooden seat and upon it sat a girl.

She was not very tall but curved as a kitten, and was clad in an elegant tweed coat with matching tan shoes and gloves. At her feet was a small canvas travelling-bag.

P.C. Bullard, heavyweight and elderly, who was on duty at the corner, had strolled down the path twice already to have a look at her, once in the way of duty and once for pure pleasure. Her sleekly-brushed hair was honey-coloured, her grey eyes flecked

with gold were widely set, and her mouth might have been drawn with a copperplate pen, so fine and yet so bold were its lines. He judged she was something over seventeen.

Bullard was puzzled by her and it was with positive relief that he, a complete stranger, saw at last a young man turn sharply in from the street and go hurrying towards her. He might have guessed that it was her destiny that other people should do the worrying about Miss Annabelle Tassie.

The newcomer, too, was an unusual type of visitor to the district. He was a small and dapper youngster with dark red hair and one of those bright little-boy faces which are so often the despair of their owners. He was twenty-two and looked no older, but there was pugnacity in the lower part of his face and his very clear blue eyes were vividly intelligent.

Richard Waterfield had seen nothing outrageous in the demand in Annabelle's letter that he should journey half across London at nine in the morning to meet her in some godforsaken square of which he had never heard. It was the first letter he had received from her in eighteen months. She was an old friend and neighbour from the Suffolk village of Dancing.

She had written, *I will wait for you in a park called Garden Green. On the map it looks nice and near the station and the train gets in at nine. I am sorry to bother you but I think someone living in London ought to be told where I shall be. I will explain when I see you. I shan't come down on you for tea or food.*

Her directness amused him. It was one reason why he had always liked the child. She had a sound grasp of essentials. He had decided to buy her an ice. He was considering this particular aspect of the problem when unexpectedly he saw her. He stopped in full stride, his ideas undergoing sudden change.

"Hullo, Richard," said Annabelle demurely.

"Hullo," he echoed cautiously, and added abruptly, "what are you dressed up like that for?"

The faintest of smiles, fleeting and content, passed over the remarkable mouth, and she made room on the seat beside her.

"I thought you'd be surprised. You haven't seen me for two years and five months. I—er—I think I look pretty good."

Richard sat down. "I hardly recognized you," he said stiffly. To his surprise she laid a hand on his.

"Don't be silly," she said. "It's still me."

He laughed gratefully. "I'm glad about that. They know at home you're here, I hope? You're not up to anything fantastic."

"No." She was unoffended. "It's more complicated than that. That's why I wanted to see you, somebody reliable. We couldn't trouble Mother. She's far too ill. I've just left school, and I was going to get a job right away. Then the letter turned up and here I am."

"So I see." He was finding it difficult to take his gaze from her face. "What letter was this?"

"Here." She produced a plump envelope and handed it to

him. "It was addressed to Mother but I had to deal with it. You'll have to read it all, I'm afraid, or you'll never get the drift."

Richard took the packet dubiously. There seemed to be a lot of letter, the pages scribbled in an untidy but purposeful hand.

7 Garden Green, London, W.2.

My dear Alice, You may not have heard of me but I should not be surprised if you have because all families talk, I know. Well dear I am your brother-in-law Frederick's wife, or widow I should say, and I think you met Frederick before you were married.

What I want to say is that Freddy and I had no kids and I have no relatives left alive to need anything. I have not won the Irish Sweep but I did sell out at the best time and have always had a bit put by, being that sort of person I expect.

To stop beating about the bush, dear, I believe there is a niece of Freddy's. I remember we saw in the paper her name was Annabelle. Well, Alice dear, I would like to see this girl. I do not want to promise anything because I am as I am and I expect so is she, and we might not get on at all, but if you can see your way to it send her up to me, and if she is what I have in mind she will not be the loser. There is something here for her to do if she is the right sort.

Now I have read this I see it looks as if I am up to I don't know what. Do not think that. I would look after her. No silly nonsense or staying out late, or anything not quite straightforward. Anyhow, that is my idea and there is no harm in asking, is there?

Shall hope to see the kid, but will understand if not.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret (Polly) Tassie.

P.S. I have opened this to say that if she should be really plain, kindly dear, forget I wrote.

Richard read the postscript twice and looked up, his youthful face blank. "I suppose someone *has* heard of her before?"

"Oh yes." Annabelle appeared alarmingly complacent. "She sounds rather a sweetie, don't you think?"

He did not answer immediately and she leaned over his shoulder.

"Well, don't you?"

"I don't know," he said honestly.

"I didn't write to Aunt Polly, because her letter was to Mother anyhow, and explanations seemed too difficult and long-winded to be put on paper. I thought I'd just come up and see what she wanted, but it all sounded a bit peculiar so I thought I'd better arrange with someone reliable to know where I was."

She paused and grinned at him, reminding him vividly of herself as he remembered her at fourteen.

"You're the only person I know in London," she said. "It was the sensible thing to write you, don't you think?"

"Of course." Richard stifled an unmanly doubt. "Seven, Garden Green. It's one of those houses over there, I suppose."

He got up. "There's a bobby down there. He'll know."

He sped off before she could attempt to join him and caught Bullard.

"Garden Green, sir? What number? Seven? That'll be the first building down that turning on the right over there. It's a museum, and there's a house attached which is occupied by the caretaker. If I recollect, she's also the owner. Name of Tassie."

"The name's right." Richard was taken by surprise. "Thank you very much, officer."

It was quite remarkable, P.C. Bullard reflected, what a memory he had got. Ask him anything you liked about the district and he could answer it pat. His was what they called a visual memory. Everything came in pictures. That little museum and the old girl who ran it, for instance. She'd only shown him round it once.

At that point a picture returned to his mind with the abruptness and clarity of a price coming up on a cash register. Standing in the middle of the pavement he felt in his pocket for his notebook, in the back of which was a worn police circular folded in four.

Details urgently required of the following persons:— Woman, seventy to eighty years, brown complexion, wearing grey or green shepherd's plaid shawl and dark brown hat decorated with large metal beads. Man similar age, white hair round lower part of face, hard hat.

An idea had occurred to Bullard which was credible, yet so bizarre that it made him feel dizzy. It was followed by another consideration and in sudden panic he looked again across Garden Green. The seat was bare. The young people had gone.

Richard watched Annabelle's progress from the corner. She had refused to let him go with her, but he had arranged to wait and see her safely inside. There was a small paved garden between the house and the road, and he watched her cross it and mount the steps to the porch, but after a while she emerged, made him a covert sign to indicate that there was no one at home, and walked on to the door in the garden wall on which there was a notice :

COLLECTION OF CURIOS

INTERESTING ANIMAL FURNITURE AND OTHER ITEMS
ACQUIRED BY THE LATE FREDERICK TASSIE ESQ.

Hours 10 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.

Monday to Friday, Admission Free

Please enter.

Annabelle read the neat professional script. Presently she glanced back up the road towards Richard once more, made a little gesture of farewell and disappeared through the door.

Once inside the Museum she saw that practically the whole of the room was crammed with unexpected objects whose only common denominator appeared to be the staggering human folly which had perpetrated them.

On a carpet-covered dais two monstrous chairs faced one another.

One had been constructed with dreadful cunning actually inside the carcass of a small elephant who knelt, trunk at the salute, to permit the sitter to rest within its quilted stomach, whilst the other had been made in the same unlikely way out of a giraffe whose sad head rose disconsolate just above the occupier's own.

Beside them towered a moth-eaten grizzly whose ferocious snarl was offset by the fact that a statue-of-liberty flambeau, adapted to electricity, sprouted from one menacing paw, and a moulting ostrich supporting an oil lamp with a pink silk shade completed the group. All four were genuine period pieces, witnesses to a fashion as barbaric and humourless as any in history.

As Annabelle walked round, the explanation occurred to her at once. Here, she realized, must be the lifetime's bag of someone who had played the time-honoured undergraduate's game of Who Can Bring Home The Awfullest Thing?

At the end of the room there was a very large glass case set beneath a partially-opened window. The exhibit it had contained was dismantled and there was nothing now in the seven-foot cube save a painted backcloth depicting blue sea, a lighthouse, and gulls; in front, a small double seat which might have come off a pier.

Glimpses of sturdy iron machinery at the side of the backcloth suggested that at some time the case had housed a working model, and Annabelle, who was attracted by such things, edged round the back and found a starting-lever. Ancient wheels began to turn, the backcloth to revolve, and at the same time the small siren concealed in the top of the case began to blare loudly.

The noise was considerable and there seemed no way of stopping it. A painted jetty appearing on the backcloth lurched jerkily across the scene, followed by a dolphin.

Annabelle was still struggling with the controls when a side door to the garden clattered open and a man came sprinting down the gangway. He laughed at her expression and, stooping in front of the case, pulled a concealed lever beneath it. The backcloth shuddered to a standstill and the noise ceased.

"That's better, isn't it? Mrs. Tassie thought it might be children. They get in here and play the goat with the place."

He treated her as if he had known her for a long time and Annabelle, to whom the approach was new, was delighted. She considered him with interest.

Although he was almost old from her point of view, thirty if not more, she found him exciting to look at. His coarse fair hair was worn *en brosse* and he had deep actor's lines down lantern cheeks. Only the heavy muscles of his neck spoiled him. His round brown eyes were bright if not otherwise expressive, and he had a long-boned loose-jointed figure which was well suited by the light khaki trench coat which he wore belted tightly round him.

"Thank you very much. I'm awfully sorry I meddled with this thing. What was it, exactly?"

He did not reply at once and she added awkwardly, "I mean what was in it? What was on the seat?"

He remained looking at her and her impression was that she had offended him somehow, or raised an unfortunate subject.

A moment later he was smiling again. "Chimpanzees," he said briefly. "Two chimps dressed as yachtsmen. They got the moth and had to be written off. Ah, here is Madame."

Annabelle saw the newcomer with a sense of deep relief. She was just an ordinary old woman, solid and kindly. A mum if ever there was one, with a pink-and-white skin and smooth grey hair. The sleeves of her dress were rolled up and she wore a pinafore decorated with forget-me-nots as innocently blue as her eyes.

As the man came up to her she put a hand on his coat.

"Thank you, my dear. I can't bear that row. Must you go? Is there anything you'd like to take with you?"

He laughed. "The bear, perhaps," he suggested, pointing to it. "Bless you, Polly, it's been lovely to see you." He put his arms round her and hugged her and she patted him, rubbing his shoulder with a funny little gesture which was pure affection. Just before he disappeared he raised a farewell hand to Annabelle.

Mrs. Tassie stood looking after him for a moment before she came on down the aisle. She was smiling happily and for the first time Annabelle caught a glimpse of her as she must have been when Uncle Frederick had forsaken home and family for her, not only a blazing country beauty, but a character, vital as the spring.

She smiled at the girl and Annabelle blushed. "I'm sorry I started the siren. I was wondering how it worked, you see, and . . ."

"Never mind. The things are here to be looked at. My husband loved showing his old toys to people. That's what gave me the idea. It's much better than a marble monument, isn't it? This place can't last, of course, but then what does? I must go over these blessed animals for moth again soon."

"That's how you lost the monkeys, isn't it?"

"No, we never had monkeys. Frederick didn't like them."

The girl was embarrassed. "The man I was just talking to said something about chimpanzees."

"That was Gerry Hawker, the sinner." Mrs. Tassie was frowning. "He didn't want to be reminded. He's lost those figures, you know, that's about it. There were two dear old people sitting in there. They were life-size and quite wonderfully done. The old woman had a nice silk dress and a shawl, and a bonnet with jet bugles on it, and the old man was so real he was as good as anything in Tussaud's. I must get them back from Gerry. They'd got a bit of moth and he took them to be renovated for me, and that's the last I heard of them, nearly a year ago."

Annabelle was curious but still she did not speak. The sun had come out and the open door, with her overnight bag in the dark corner beside it, was suddenly very inviting. She took a step towards it but a hand closed over her arm.

"You've not come to see all this dusty old junk." The kindly voice was full of laughter. "You've come to see me, haven't you, and you thought you'd have a look round before you introduced

yourself. That's Freddy's family all over. Very wise, my poppet."

She swung the girl round to face her. "You're Annabelle Tassie, sent up by your mamma to see your Aunt Polly," she announced, her smile radiant, "and you're just what I want, duckie. Absolutely bang-on, as they say. Come inside."

Richard lingered on the corner a little longer than the ten minutes agreed upon in case Annabelle decided to return.

Where the roads met there was a large double pillarbox and he was behind it when the man in the trench coat came hurrying out of the door in the garden wall. He walked straight along to the porch and emerged a moment later carrying a hat. Since he also slammed the door behind him it was evident to the watching Richard that he carried a key. Then he climbed into the sports car parked across the road and shot off, to be halted almost immediately by the traffic at the turning into Edge Street.

Richard, on foot, was able to cross and board a bus before the car could enter the stream, but as he settled himself on the front seat of the top deck he discovered that the driver had edged his way into the flow and was now directly below and in front of him.

Both vehicles were stationary in the mid-morning traffic jam and Richard had every opportunity of watching him as he leaned idly on the car door looking at the foot passengers as they passed by him. Richard's curiosity was deeply piqued. In the letter which Annabelle had shown him there had been nothing to account for this character who seemed so much at home at Number Seven.

The car fitted the man perfectly. It was a Lagonda, elderly but so tuned and titivated that only the gallantry of its basic lines remained. It was open and Richard could see a coil of fine rope on the worn leather seat, a starting handle with a dirty tie-on label fluttering from it, and a wooden crate.

At last the jam disentangled itself for a minute or two, and the bus swept away, but when Richard descended, he saw the Lagonda again. It was in a side street, standing before the door of a barber's.

Richard hardly hesitated. The familiar way in which the driver of the sports car had opened the door of Number Seven had shaken him and he wanted very much to know who he was. He pushed open the door and stepped down into the scented steam-filled room which buzzed with conversation. The noise stopped abruptly as he appeared and five pairs of eyes regarded him with slightly hostile astonishment.

The man in the white coat who was attending to the driver of the sports car looked at Richard inquisitively and waved him to a seat.

"Just a moment, sir. Percy here is just finishing. I shall be a little time on the Major, and that gentleman beside you is waiting for me. But you'll find Perce is quite all right."

The man referred to as the Major glanced at his watch. "Incidentally, what is the time exactly?" The question turned out to be amazingly popular with everybody. The proprietor—Mr. Vick—turned at once to the flyblown disc on the wall behind him.

"That clock is dead right by the Shakespeare Head long bar, slow by Ronnie's next door, and fast by the B.B.C.," he announced.

"It is four minutes and twenty-three—don't stop me, twenty-four, twenty-five seconds fast pre-cisely," said a man with a sporting paper, looking at his wristwatch.

"Wait," commanded a fat man, heaving himself up, and accomplishing hasty manœuvres under his shrouding cape. "This is the right time. This is the real time. Railway time, that's what this is." He brought out a large silver pocket watch, looked at it earnestly, and put it back. "You're not far out," he said.

Richard shot back his own cuff out of force of habit, remembered that his watch was being cleaned, and glanced up sharply to find the Major watching him through the glass. The round eyes turned away at once but Richard was left with the odd but very definite conviction that for some reason the Major was pleased.

"I make it a quarter to," he remarked. "If you're right, this wretched thing of mine has lost a minute and twenty seconds in the past half hour. Exactly thirty minutes ago I was driving over Westminster Bridge and as Big Ben chimed I put it right."

Richard's pugnacious young face became blank. The lie uttered so deliberately appeared to be so unnecessary. His speculations were interrupted by the convulsion in the room caused by the fat man getting up, and by the time he himself was in the vacated seat and had persuaded the foreign assistant not to make too much of a job of the unwanted haircut, the Major had risen, paid his score, and taken his trench coat from the peg.

He then performed the second little act which the younger man found curious. On entering he had evidently stripped off his raincoat with his jacket inside it, and now he put them on in the same way, so that the outside of the jacket did not appear.

"I'm going to see a hero of yours this evening," he said to Vick, "to do a little business with him. Moggie Moorhen."

At the name of the celebrated comedian the barber's fallow face warmed. "My word, that'll be an experience. Just the very exact same off as 'e is on, I shouldn't wonder."

The Major turned deliberately to Richard's looking-glass and winked. "I hope not," he said dryly, "or we'll finish the evening swinging from the Savoy lighting fixtures." He went out laughing.

Mr. Vick paused, towel in hand, to raise himself on his toes to see over the curtain.

"There he goes," he remarked with feminine bitterness. "The Savoy if you please. He's a very funny finger, the Major, and he's in a very funny mood. I tell you an extraordinary thing. This is the third or fourth time I've seen 'im do it, and no one would be more amazed than 'e'd be 'imself if you told 'im of it. Unconscious, it is. But when 'e's in one of these off-the-'andle now-for-it sort of moods 'e's always in a tizzy about the right time. 'E always mentions it, 'e always gets the whole shop arguin' about it, and nearly always picks on the man who 'asn't got a watch."

At this point the assistant barber removed the shrouding cape

from Richard's shoulders and gave his neck a cursory whisk.

"I think he is a policeman," he sighed. "Anyhow, he has left his belongings." He nodded towards a wooden box, the coil of rope and the starting handle.

"There now!" Mr. Vick's scream was like a toy train. "'E brought them out of the street for safety and then forgot them. That proves 'e's no p'liceman. You'll see. 'E'll be back. I've known 'im do *that* before. Ah, what did I tell you . . ."

The door had shuddered open and the man in the trench coat appeared on the threshold. He was grinning and deeply apologetic, and his smile included Richard, who was putting on his jacket.

The wooden box seemed to be remarkably heavy and when he had hoisted it into his arms he was fully laden. Richard gathered up the rope and the handle. "I'll bring these."

"Will you? Thanks a lot. My old bus is outside, can I give you a lift to the West End?"

Richard was looking at the starting handle he was carrying. The worn label tied to its shaft had fluttered over and the pencilled inscription was just readable. "Hawker. Rolf's Dump, S.E."

He scarcely saw it. As if it had attracted his attention for the first time the Major leaned over and pulled it off, pitching it into the gutter. "Coming?" he inquired.

Richard looked up. "Thank you," he said with sudden deliberation, "I should like that."

Matthew Phillipson, senior partner of Southern, Wood and Phillipson, family solicitors, was a spare elderly man. He had telephoned to ask if he could drop round to see Polly Tassie. She had invited him to lunch. "You're a wonderful cook, Polly," he assured her. "You always were. You're looking young too, if I may say so. Radiant. Has anything happened?"

"Has it!" From across the table she looked up at him, her bright blue eyes dancing. "Matt, old sport, it came off. They sent her. Nearly eighteen, trying to look grown-up. She's here now, only arrived this morning. I thought you might want to talk business so I gave her some lunch early and sent her out to look at the shops. She'll be back before you go. And Matt, she's a beauty, a real, true, film-star knock-out. Really lovely. One of those faces which turn your heart over and a body like one of the little bits of nonsense you see on the screen."

He burst out laughing. "You're clucking, Polly," he said, "but I'm thankful to hear it. Blood is much thicker than water." He hesitated. "You'll be completing that document, then?"

"Oh, I think so. I'd only got to put the name in, hadn't I? You were right, Matt. I realized it when I saw her."

"Oh well, I'm glad," said Mr. Phillipson, sighing. "I brought it along with me, as a matter of fact. These things are better completed. We'll see to it after lunch."

Mrs. Tassie did not answer immediately, but as she brought the coffee to the table she ventured a guarded question.

"You're going to have a word with that boy for me this afternoon, aren't you?"

"I saw him yesterday."

"Gerry Hawker?" She had started and the dark fragrant liquid spilt over the saucer and into the tray.

"Don't look like that, Polly. He's the guilty party, not you."

She was mopping up the tray. "Did you tell him I knew?"

"No. I obeyed your instructions faithfully. I promised him complete secrecy if he pays up."

"Are you making him pay it back?"

"Of course I am, my dear girl." He flushed with annoyance.

"He has altered one of your cheques from eleven pounds to seventy, robbing you of fifty-nine pounds as surely as if he'd taken it from your purse. By condoning. . ."

"I haven't done that." She spoke sharply. "I may feel towards Gerry as if he were my own, but I won't stand for him doing anything really wrong. As soon as I noticed it, didn't I write to you at once? Gerry has got to be pulled up good and sharp. But I want to keep out of it, not only because I don't want to lose his confidence but because I don't want him to lose *me*. Do you see what I mean?"

"Perfectly," he assured her dryly. "I can't say I like it."

"Of course you don't. It's criminal. It could mean prison for him if he did it to someone else. That's why I had to do something. But he's a dear, Matt, a kind good boy when you know him. Freddy liked him, and we've known him for years. He couldn't turn out to be a real bad hat after all, could he?"

It was a plea, and Mr. Phillipson knew exactly what she meant.

"Oh, he's not the ordinary irresponsible type," he assured her.

"The tale he told was one I could well believe and, to a certain extent, sympathize with. We'll do what we can for this wretched chap. If he turns up with the money tonight that'll be the end of it, but I shouldn't see much more of him."

She smiled at him gratefully but her lips were still forming the words she did not like to utter.

"The people in your office will know all about it?" she said.

"No, they won't. I've prepared for that. He's coming in after five. I shall wait for him until half past, and I've kept your two letters on the subject out of the file. I've promised him the whole thing is confidential between himself and me. And now, my dear, if you feel like it, we'll settle that little matter of the residue of your estate." He put his hand in an inside pocket and she nodded absently, her mind still on the earlier subject.

"Gerry's all right," she repeated stoutly. "He only wants the right girl to love him and boss him. . . . Now give me the pen."

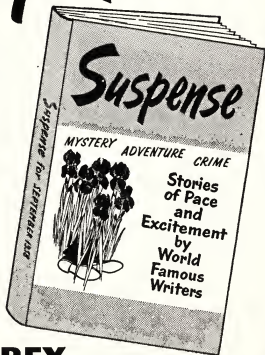
Later, as she was letting him out of the front door, Annabelle came up the path. Mr. Phillipson looked down at her from the top of the porch steps and turned a blank face to his hostess.

"Good heavens," he said briefly. "This young lady's a very great responsibility."

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Annabelle laughed at them both. "I'm fairly safe out," she murmured, reddening.

"Of course you are. He doesn't mean that." Polly flew to the rescue. "He's just telling me to look after you as he looks after me, like a hen. Who gave a taxi driver ten bob to take me home when I was waiting in the rain, eh Matt? Go along with you, you old sinner, looking so innocent."

Mr. Phillipson had not the face for innocence but he did appear astonished. "Not I," he said earnestly.

"Oh Matt, you haven't forgotten the Avenue, that dreadful wet night when there was a murder going on in the very next street? Next day the papers were full of it. You *must* remember the moneylender who was taken away in a bus?"

"I do," Annabelle put in. "There were other people in the bus too, which made it idiotic. Didn't you read about it?"

"No." Mr. Phillipson wiped his hands of the whole affair. "I avoid crime except when I have to deal with it."

He went off down the path, waved from the gate, and strode away, a slender upright figure. Polly watched him go with deep affection. She put an arm round the girl's shoulders as they went into the house. "Who else could it have been? I haven't many old friends in London."

Annabelle was delighted with the mystery and her voice was full of joyous nonsense. "I know, the murderer saw you and thought you might recognize him and stop him, and so he got you out of the way. That means he's someone you know."

"Don't!" Polly's reaction was so violent it startled even herself. "Oh, how you frightened me," she said laughing. "What a horrible idea, darling." She paused for a moment. "I know some damn silly boys but no murderers, thank God."

The man who had introduced himself as Jeremy Chad-Horder, and had disclaimed his wartime rank of Major as out of date, was chattering amiably. "Where shall we stagger next to top up the alcoholic content? The Midget Club in Minton Mews?"

"Good idea." Since Richard was particularly anxious to discover what kind of people had got hold of Annabelle without actually spying on her, the opportunity seemed heaven-sent.

The Lagonda was parked in Curzon Street and they walked through from Piccadilly to collect it and drove to the northern side of the West End, leaving the car in a little alley just behind Minton Square. The wooden box was now safely in the boot.

"The Midget is just along here on the right," Gerry explained. "Some people call it Edna's, after the woman who runs it."

He took the other man's elbow and guided him up a flight of oak stairs leading to the first floor.

The Midget Club was smart of its kind and what was called by its habitués, "exclusive, sort of." It occupied the whole of the first floor of the small period house, with a spacious L-shaped room divided by a large archway. Behind the bar was a tall dark woman

of thirty-two or three, who wore a severely tailored suit in grey cloth, and whose hair was brushed into a smooth hard shape like a shell. It was evident that she was the Edna of the club's title, general manageress, and at least part-owner.

Richard was aware of her quick, appraising glance, and was looking at her when her eyes left him and passed to his companion. A wave of feeling, so violent that he actually saw it, swept over her, leaving her cautious and expressionless.

"Hullo, Gerry, gin?"

"And ginger. Richard here insists on beer but doesn't mind it bottled. Can you oblige him?"

"Of course. It's a long time since you've been in." The tone was bright and yet the remark sounded like a reproach.

Gerry looked at her over his glass, his eyes meeting hers and holding them. "So what?"

"Gerry, I want to talk to you. Come into the rehearsal room for a moment. I shan't keep you long."

It seemed certain that he was about to say something unforgivable, but he let the moment pass.

"Oh well, it would be something to do, wouldn't it?" he observed unexpectedly. "Richard must come too. He can dance with you while I play the piano."

"You're not so terribly amusing," she said savagely, but she came round the bar at once and led them into a square, comparatively light room which duplicated the one they had just left. It was bare save for a row of bentwood chairs and a black piano.

Gerry sat down at the piano at once, and began to play, revealing a sound if mediocre talent but a very distinctive touch. As he let the familiar notes trickle through his fingers, he watched with wide-open lazy eyes the irritated woman standing above him.

"Oh for God's sake, Gerry," she began at last, "you'll be sorry if you don't hear this. This is serious. I'm expecting Warren Torrenden in."

"Never heard of him."

"Oh Gerry, don't be such a *silly* liar. You went to Silverstone with him on the fourteenth and you were calling yourself Hawker or something. I don't know what you let him in for but he's certainly looking for you. That's what I've got to tell you."

"Simply not true," he observed affably.

"But Gerry, you were there and you were with him. Everybody in the club saw you both. It was on television. You were standing just behind the commentator in the crowd."

"You saw someone else," he said. "It's as easy as that."

"It's not. You see, I was watching with Peter Fellows, whom you don't know, and when I said, 'There's Gerry,' he said, 'There's Warren.' Peter must have mentioned it to Torrenden because a few days later he came roaring in looking for you. He said your name was Gerry Hawker and I said it wasn't. He comes in every day about half past four hoping to run into you; anyway you can answer the question once and for all by meeting him."

"Very well, I will."

Richard drew away. "Time I drifted off."

"Oh don't break up the party." The protest from Gerry was astonishingly forceful. "Let's wait and meet this chap Torrenden. He's making an ass of himself, but it's something one ought to scotch, I suppose." He began to play the rumba again, joyously now so that Richard's feet began to move.

"Edna," Gerry went on suddenly, "do you remember our cottage at Bray?"

"Why bring that up?"

"Because I like to see your face change." He was laughing, holding her glance with his own. Her sulky colour deepened and she looked cowed and as if she was going to cry.

"It wasn't *our* cottage," she protested with a return of spirit as soon as she achieved command of herself. It was clear that she resented this past incident of her sex life being trotted out before Richard. "If you remember, you'd rented that cottage furnished for a month for an elderly couple who, you said, were clients of yours. They'd come down from Yorkshire, had sold up their home, and were on their way to South Africa. I only came down because they'd gone off earlier than they expected. The poor old idiots hadn't even packed properly, so we kept coming across things they'd forgotten. The woman had even left a handbag."

Her voice died before Gerry's stare and Richard also was struck by something very odd in his face. Just for a moment it became utterly blank, not merely without expression but deserted, as if there was no one behind it.

The familiar rueful smile returned almost at once.

"Gosh, I don't remember anything about the place except that it smelt of jasmine and the river ran through the garden," he said presently. "I remember we swam at night and there were glow-worms on the other bank. You were quite different down there, Edna. Not so hard . . ." He lifted his face to her and grudging, yet very grateful, she bent and kissed him on the mouth. It was done very lightly, very naturally, but the tension went out of her like the strain out of a taut wire.

Eventually Gerry glanced at his watch.

"It's a quarter to five," he said. "If Torrenden is coming he ought to be in the next room. Run along and see, darling, and if he is, bring him in here. It'll be less embarrassing for him. Come on, give us the key, through you go."

He got up, slid an arm round her, released the key from her fingers and led her over to the inner door, which he unlocked for her. With his hand on the latch he paused, kissed her once more, slapped her gently behind, and pushed her through the door which he closed after her and locked again. Then, moving quietly, he walked across the room to the double doors, opened them, and glanced back at Richard. "Sorry to let you in for this," he said charmingly, "but it'll save a dreary scene if we go out this way. She's a dear gal but boringly possessive." . . .

POLLY stood in the Museum, a neat figure surrounded by all her formidable junk. She was smiling at Superintendent Luke. "What do you *want*?" she demanded unexpectedly. "I've shown you all Freddy's old rubbish and yet here you are growing more and more depressed while I watch you."

Her glance travelled down the room to where Campion and Annabelle were enjoying an exploratory conversation concerning mutual friends in the country.

"I was looking for some waxworks," Luke said, turning to her. Her face was placid enough. "What a pity," she said sincerely. "I had two, but they've gone. They were in that case there."

"How long ago?"

"Oh, they were here last winter. They were thrown out at spring-cleaning. Why?"

Luke did not reply immediately. He had known in his bones that P.C. Bullard was going to be right, the moment he had put his nose in the hall. "They was the *same*, Mr. Luke, the same as the description," Bullard had said. "What that witness saw in this area was not two people in a teashop but two wax figures in a glass case. I'll take my dying oath on it."

Luke took out a packet of frayed papers and consulted the original description.

"Can you remember these things, Mrs. Tassie?"

"Yes. An old man and an old woman in Victorian costume."

"Fancy dress?"

"I wouldn't call it fancy dress, exactly. The old lady had a red dress and a shepherd's plaid stole and a bonnet in black silk."

"What about the man?"

"Well, he was the real trouble." She appeared embarrassed. "He was dropping to bits. His beard had been cut into a nice tidy round and his hard hat cleaned, but his suit was black turned green and the moth had got it."

Polly wavered. Her eyes were anxious and she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Ought you to have seen them? Was it important? Does it matter that they've gone?"

Luke smiled at her. "No," he said cheerfully. "It was a question of satisfying my own mind."

Turning away from the empty showcase, they made a move to join the other two.

Annabelle was full of news.

"Mr. Campion's wife is Amanda Fitton, Aunt Polly," she announced. "We know her sister at home."

Mr. Campion did not follow Luke immediately when he left, but lingered for a moment or two chatting to Annabelle. He was dithering slightly in the way which those who had cause to know him best might have found a little sinister. His pale face was vacuous, and his pale eyes were lazy behind their spectacles.

"It's such a jolly neighbourhood, don't you think?" he was saying earnestly as he waved an idle hand. "I understand there's a magnificent store somewhere down here called Cuppages,

famous for its sales and for men's gloves. Have you ever bought men's gloves in a sale at Cuppages, Mrs. Tassie?"

From behind his spectacles Mr. Campion observed Polly with interest and saw first astonishment and then incredulity, followed by a flicker of instantly-suppressed alarm, appear and vanish on her kindly face. When she bade him good-bye she was on guard.

Luke walked with him to pick up the police car.

Luke's wireless operator sprang out of the car and came towards them, a written message in his outstretched hand.

"This is what we've been waiting for," Luke exclaimed joyfully.

"They're fairly certain they've got the bus. It's been hidden for eight months in a square mile of scrap called Rolf's Dump."

"We want crumpets, and for God's sake see the butter is fresh. Cake, Richard? No? Very well then, tea and crumpets."

Gerry stretched himself in the deep brocade-covered chair and waved an impatient hand at the ancient waiter.

"This old place has got the kiss of death written all over it, but it's useful," he continued.

Richard, who was sitting beside him in the dim lounge of the Tenniel Hotel, followed his gaze with open disapproval. After the escape from the Midget Club he felt he was liable to find himself involved in something very dubious very soon.

"Are we waiting for somebody?" he inquired suddenly.

The flat expressionless eyes of the man beside him opened wide.

"Good heavens, no. Why?"

Now more than ever, Richard was aware of the strong element of deliberation in Gerry which he had first noticed in the barber's shop. He was going about some business, conducting some carefully-considered undertaking which, Richard felt uncomfortably, was going according to plan. How he himself was supposed to figure in the performance Richard had no idea . . .

"I tell you what I have in mind for this evening and I don't want any refusal," Gerry began, with an engaging air of frankness. "I've been hanging on to you like a leech all this afternoon and you're not going to escape me now. This is the position. I live in a rather decent little residential hotel, Lydaw Court, Kensington, and they've got a party on tonight. I've promised I'll bring a young man to partner some of the girls. I can offer you a decent meal and very nice company."

He produced a visiting card. It was engraved:

Mr. Jeremy Chad-Horder, Lydaw Court Hotel, Kensington, W.8

The old waiter ploughed forward. Gerry smiled at him.

"Some more of your excellent crumpets. Hot, this time, and not quite so black round the edges."

The ancient face remained expressionless. "For two, sir?"

"None for me," said Richard hastily.

"Oh, but you've got to. I'm going to telephone a girl I know and I may be hours."

"I'll go on drinking tea."

"Will you? Oh, very well, bring some more tea, waiter, and no crumpets. Off you go." Gerry leaned back in his chair.

"What an evil-eyed old drear," he observed. "He'll remember me, won't he? He loves me not. Don't get me wrong about this girl, by the way. I've not been captured. It's just that she's delectable, lusciously young, and she's fallen for me and so—" he peered at his watch, "and so I humour her. Well now, it is a quarter to six."

"Is it?" Richard was astonished. He felt his own naked wrist and glanced round for a clock. Gerry displayed his forearm with a good Swiss watch upon it.

"There you are," he said. "On the dot. She'll have just come in. My God, Richard, you should see her. She's extraordinary. Lovely. Very smooth golden-brown hair, cut so that it just brushes her tweed collar. Enormous grey eyes and a perfect skin. She can't be out of her teens and she looks edible. Wait here for me, old boy. I shan't be more than ten minutes. There are the phone boxes, see? Down there in the hall at the end of the corridor. You can keep me under your eye all the time."

He sprang up, strode across the vast room, and down the long passage to the vestibule.

After that point in distance it was not really possible for any normally-sighted person to pick out much detail. As it was, Richard saw the man he knew as Jeremy Chad-Horder bearing down upon the telephone booths, glanced away for a moment, and lost sight of him. He assumed he had entered one of them.

In fact Gerry had approached the line of booths and had walked along swiftly beside it as if he were seeking an unoccupied one. When he came to the last of the line, which was out of sight, he turned smartly round behind it and stepped out of the small doorway normally used by hotel servants bringing in luggage. He moved quickly and with that complete lack of hesitation which he had displayed as he had prepared Richard's mind for his telephone call. By making use of a mews, a furniture shop with a back entrance, and a passage kept open by ancient custom to give access to a no longer useful pump, Gerry reached the Lagonda in something under two minutes.

As he had expected, the long car was now almost alone in the cobbled lane. He unlocked the boot to take out the box, the rope, and a worn ex-Army beret which was lying under them. This he put on and taking off his trench coat, locked it away. Finally, he ran first one hand and then the other along the running-board, and rubbed his face with his dirty hands. At last he took up the rope and shook it out, revealing it as a loop carefully knotted. This he placed round his neck, lifted the box into the sling it made, and set off down the lane.

He came out into Minton Terrace in a matter of seconds and the overhead lights showed the remarkable change in his appearance. His navy chalk-striped jacket had been made for a bigger man and was oil-stained and ragged, the elbows out, and padding

protruding from the shoulder where the sleeve was coming away.

The beret, which completely covered his distinctive hair, was dusty, and his face was dirty enough to be virtually unrecognizable. The rope sling gave him a professional air and the rough wooden box was typical of millions. Above all, his manner was convincing. Every movement he made, every line in his taut body, and the impatient half-whistle from between his teeth, were calculated to convey to one and all that he was a heavy-duty delivery man, that he was late, that shops and offices were closing, and somewhere in the gloom his van was waiting, its driver swearing in its cab.

His performance was particularly convincing as he came bounding up the stone steps of the office block at 24, Minton Terrace.

The offices of Messrs. Southern, Wood and Phillipson occupied the whole of the basement floor, but they closed at five and the staircase which ran down behind the lift was deserted.

Gerry strode across the hall towards this well. At the top of the stairs he paused to drag a small ragged receipt book from his pocket, and dropped the wooden box on to the marble for a moment while he looked for it. The box hit the stone with the vicious double crash of a pistol shot, a savage noise which seemed to epitomize the roughness of the role he was playing. The old commissioner, although he frowned helplessly at the clatter, made no attempt to admonish him.

Having found, apparently, the necessary receipt form, Gerry lifted the box again and rattled down the stone staircase with it.

The passage below contained only two mahogany doors, both of which bore the name of Mr. Matthew Phillipson's firm. The newcomer lowered his box gently beside the first of them, replaced the receipt book in his left pocket and thrust a hand deep into the right one. When it came out again it was holding a gun.

There was a bell on the door and he pressed it with his elbow, and flipped the knocker with the nose of the weapon, so that it fell noisily. The breathy whistle through his teeth did not cease.

The right time, but not by the watch he had shown Richard, was half past five exactly.

As the door opened and old Matt Phillipson's face appeared, Gerry fired carefully and once again the distinctive noise, as of a heavy wooden box falling upon a stone floor, a sound sharp and violent as a pistol shot, echoed up the well of the staircase.

Gerry did not close the door, but bending swiftly over the old man, he thrust his hand into the inside breast pocket and drew out the plump black wallet hidden there. Then he swung the box up into his arms again and stamped up the staircase with it.

All the time he was listening for a hue and cry behind him, but there was none. As he had hoped, Mr. Phillipson had kept his bargain and had waited alone.

As Gerry reached the hall the lift came down and he was swept out of the building amid a flurry of typists from the top floor.

Peering out into the misty shadows he bellowed to his non-existent van driver. "Wrong 'ouse, mate! Try the Square."

He plunged out into the throng. Despite the crowds he reached the mouth of the alley in nine seconds and was beside the car in a further ten. It took him four minutes to lock the box away, rearrange his jacket and scarf, put on his trench coat, and scrub his face with a couple of clean handkerchiefs. There was no outcry from Minton Terrace, no sound of police whistles.

He had reckoned on it taking him an extra two minutes to get back to the Tenniel, because the furniture shop would now be closed and that short-cut denied him, but in the narrow street, his alternative route, he passed behind an open truck held up by the lights and he threw the looped rope and beret in the back of it.

Gerry was almost level with the hotel door when an unrehearsed encounter occurred. There was a patter of feet behind him, followed by a familiar laugh. That brought him swinging round to confront Mr. Vick of all people. The barber was delighted.

"Why, Major!" he cried exuberantly, "it is you! What a coin-ci-dence!" He stood smiling, his inquisitive eyes bright.

"You're just off to catch Mr. Moor'en, I suppose?" he added wistfully. "My word Major, you don't 'alf walk fast, you know."

It was three hours since his carefully prepared alibi had been destroyed by his chance meeting with the inquisitive little barber, and Gerry had altered in appearance. His normal casualness of manner had become exaggerated, so that the barman of The Rose and Crown behind the old Royal Albert Music Hall where Morris Moorhen was appearing in *Bowl Me Over*, would have sworn off-hand that Gerry was the more drunk of the two.

This was an assumption which could not have been more wrong.

"In ten minutes you'll be in old Moggie's dressing-room, Major," Mr. Vick was saying with a bobbysox shiver. "Oh my word, I do wish I could see you two together! I believe you're selling him a song. Don't deny it, I can see it in your eyes, I'm psychic. Be a sport and tell me, go on, do." He turned to the bartender. "He won't tell me anything," he went on, his voice breaking. "We've been together all the evening. . ."

"Ever since opening time. I've had him on my hands since a quarter past five and I'm still sane," Gerry said with just the right air of affable indulgence. "I shall have to leave him here for ten minutes while I nip into the theatre. Don't give him any more of that stuff than you can help."

"It's a nice sherry." The bartender pushed over the bottle.

"Time for the interval, Major, look at the time!" Mr. Vick went off like an alarm clock. He was pointing at the bold-faced clock over the door and was in danger of falling off his stool.

Gerry burst out laughing and exchanged amused glances with the bartender. "Take care of him until I come back," he said. "I shan't be ten minutes."

"I'd like to see old Moggie and old Moggie'd like to see me," said Mr. Vick, emerging into the open after the bait which had been dangled before him all the evening.

"I doubt it." As Gerry went out of the back door nearest to the theatre the bartender's soothing voice reached him.

"If you've been on sherry since opening time, sir, I wonder if you'd like a change? What about a nice Fernet Branca cocktail?"

Meanwhile, Gerry was walking swiftly away from the pub. There was a contented smile on his lips. "Since opening time." The words were so satisfactory that he repeated them aloud. It was the point he had been trying to establish all the evening and now that it had been done, and he had a new alibi in place of the other which had gone astray, he felt infinitely happier.

Perhaps if his attitude to the precaution had been less superstitious and more practical it might have occurred to him that two alibis for the same vital quarter of an hour, one in Richard's mind and one in Mr. Vick's, might be more dangerous than none at all. That realization came later.

He turned into a small eating house, ordered coffee, and listened to the nine o'clock news from a wireless on the counter.

There was no police message, no mention of a West End crime.

Presently he pushed his cup away and drew out the black wallet which he had taken from Matt Phillipson's body. In one pocket he found a reasonable wad of pound notes and a couple of fivers, but it was when he was looking to see if there were any more that he discovered the two letters, clipped together and kept there for safety. Gerry recognized Polly's sprawling handwriting and a flood of tingling blood rose up from his stomach to suffuse his face. Apprehension, breathtaking and terrible, took possession of him and he spread the sheets out with hands that trembled.

There it was, clear and irrevocable.

... the money doesn't matter but you must tell him, dear. Make it clear how wrong and how dangerous it is, but leave me out. Once he knows I know, the mischief will be done as he'll be afraid and keep away and there'll be no one to keep an eye on him. . .

The coarse skin on the lined forehead was damp. Gerry hardly dared to read the second letter. The nerves in his face contracted into a net of pain, and the blood in his heart felt icy.

... Thank you, Matt, what a dear old sport you are. Thursday night, then. I'll be thinking of you both. If you can just give him a good fright it may pull him right up and make him see sense. He's all right when you know him, one of the best. Give me a ring afterwards or better still come in and see me. Love, Polly.

She knew. She knew of the appointment and would know therefore of everything else. For the first time he saw his two alibis for what they were, two over-elaborate sums cancelling each other out.

Gradually he became aware of a shadow before him and looking up he saw the waitress standing close before him. The wallet lay wide open on the table, the money exposed.

"Put it away," she said softly, "you're drunk, aren't you?"

He pulled himself together at once and his charm lit up his face.

"Bless you," he said quickly, gathering up the notes and

thrusting them into his breast. "I'm sorry. I was reading a letter. It's a bit of a knock-out . . . from a woman."

"She's found you out, has she?"

He shivered. "It seems so."

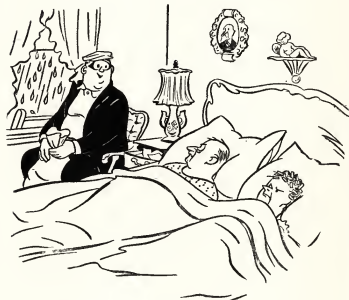
"Well, you'll have to do something about her, won't you?"

For a time he stared at her in open horror, silent as the full implication of the words sank in.

Then, "Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I shall."

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★ *The last part of Hide My Eyes by Margery Allingham appears in next month's Suspense on sale August 29*



"I should be able to leave soon. Big drops always mean it won't last long"

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